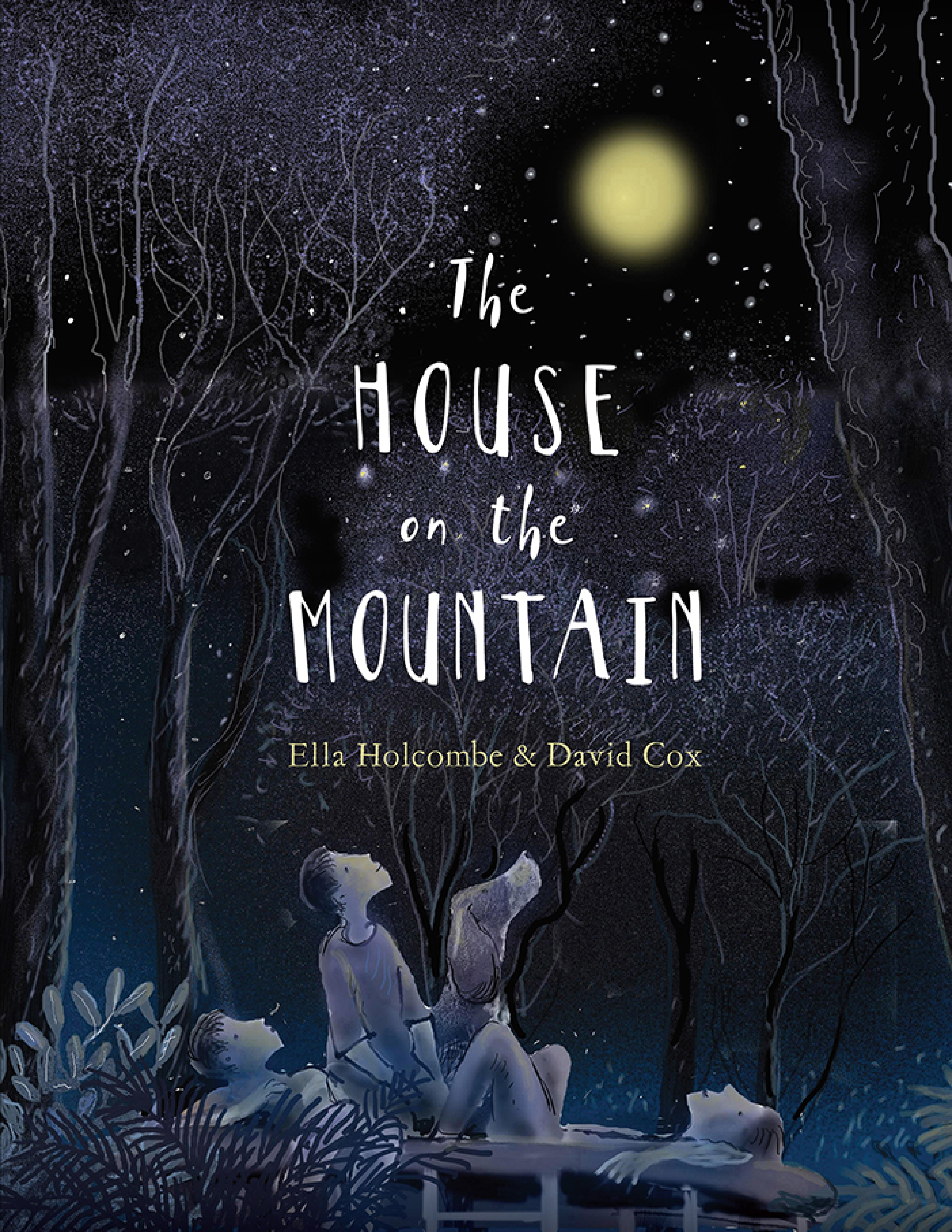
The HOUSE on the MOUNTAIN

Ella Holcombe & David Cox



For Mum, Dad, Eugene, Patrick and Brittany ~E.H.

For my great-grandchildren, Mikayla and Myles ~D.C.

This story is set in Kinglake, on traditional Wurundjeri land. We wish to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of this land, and pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

Wurun means manna gum, and djeri is the word for the witchety grubs that live in and around these trees. So Wurundjeri means Manna Gum People, or Witchety Grub People.

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Allen & Unwin

83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.allenandunwin.com

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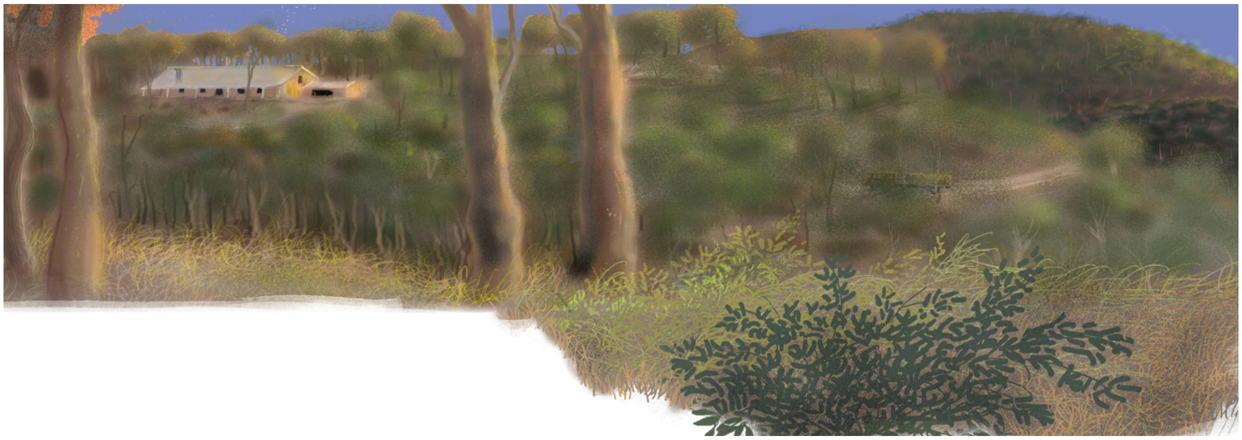
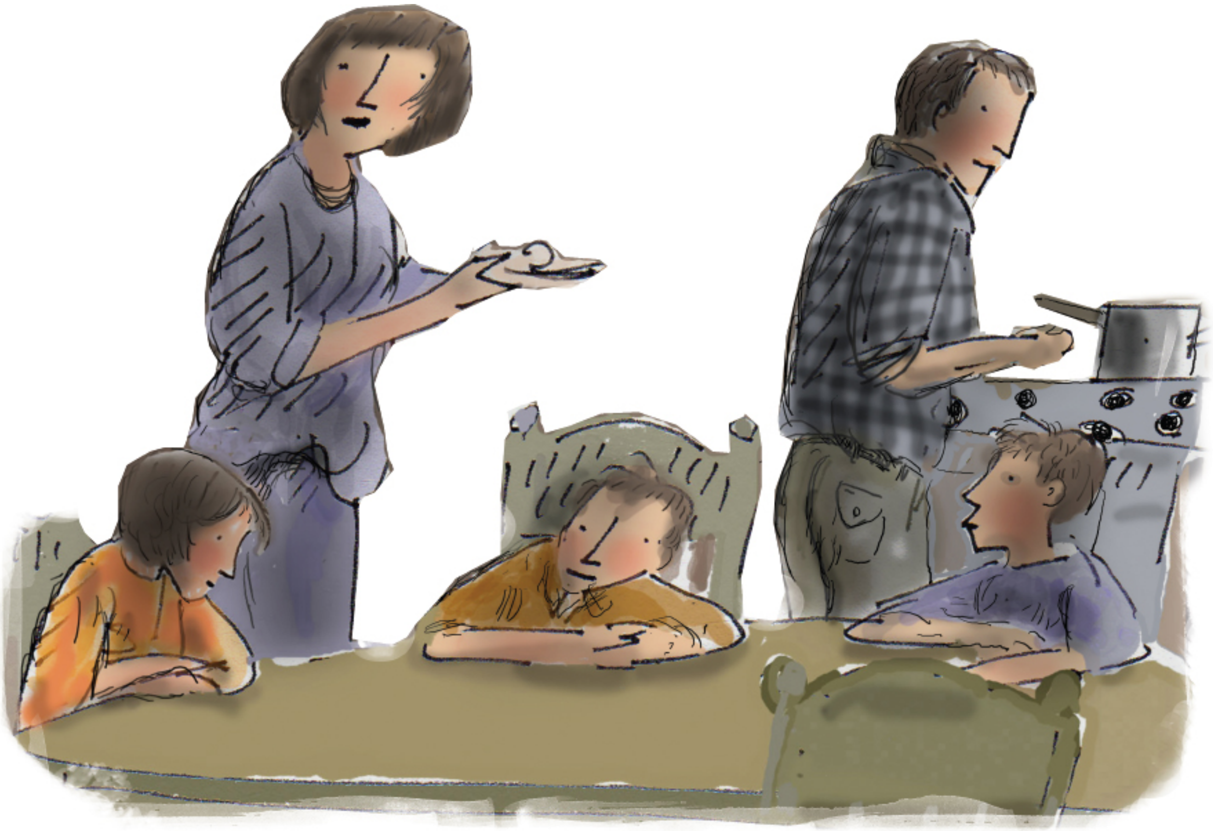
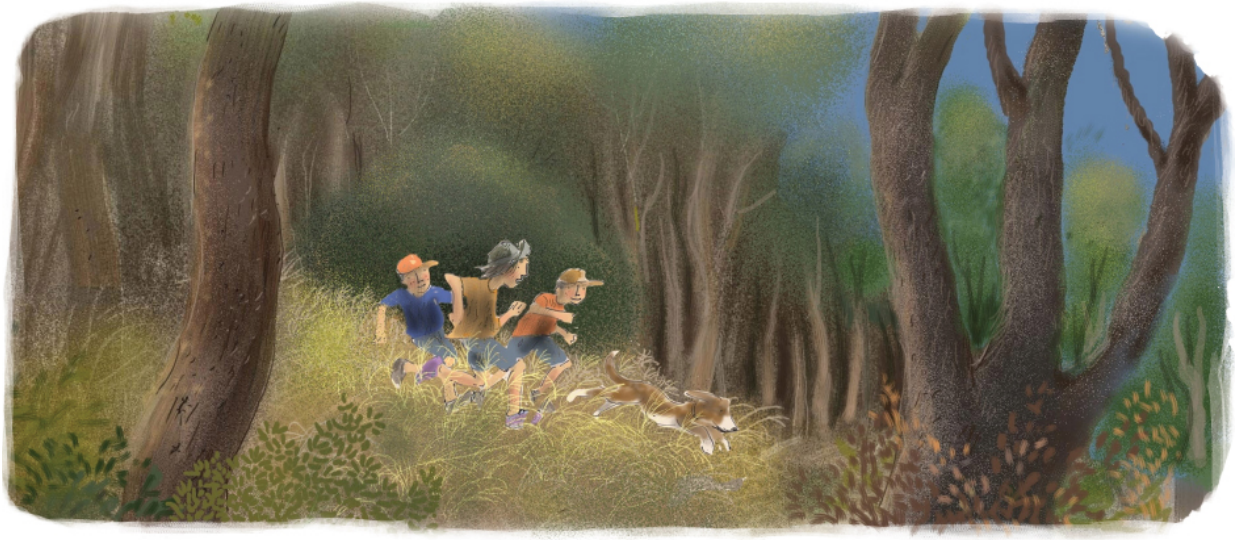


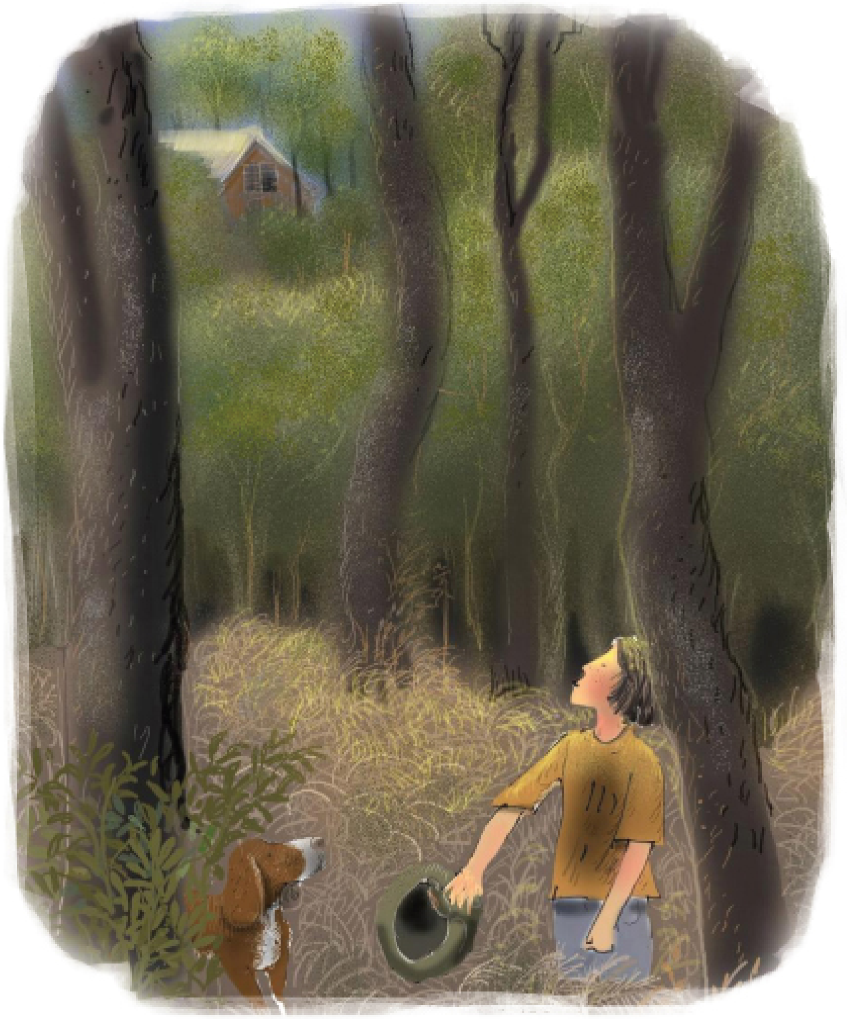
THE DAY BEFORE the fire comes seems just like any other. School starts again tomorrow, and another hot day stretches out in front of us. In the morning, Mum closes all the windows and pulls the curtains across, trying to keep the heat out, but by lunchtime, outside and inside feel the same. The tired old fan blows warm air around the kitchen, and everything is heavy and still.



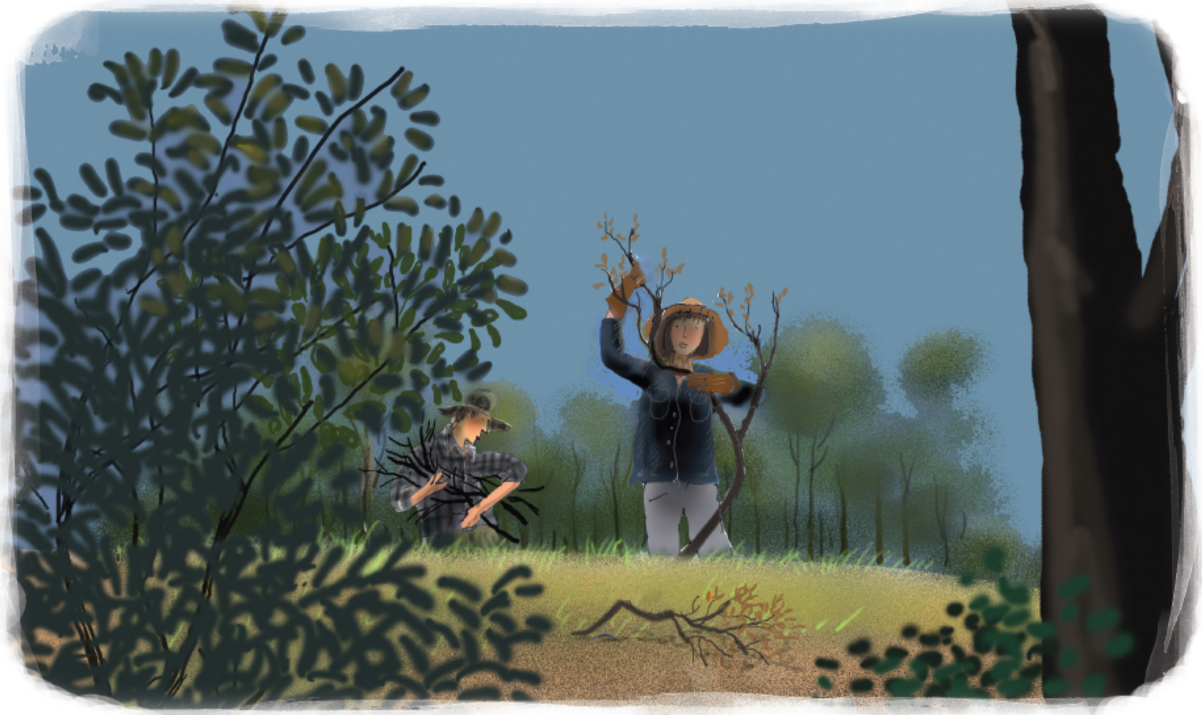
My twin brothers and I shake off the stillness and disappear into the bush. We chase skinks, poke jumping-jack nests, and race down the hill through the dry bracken, Ruby leading the way.

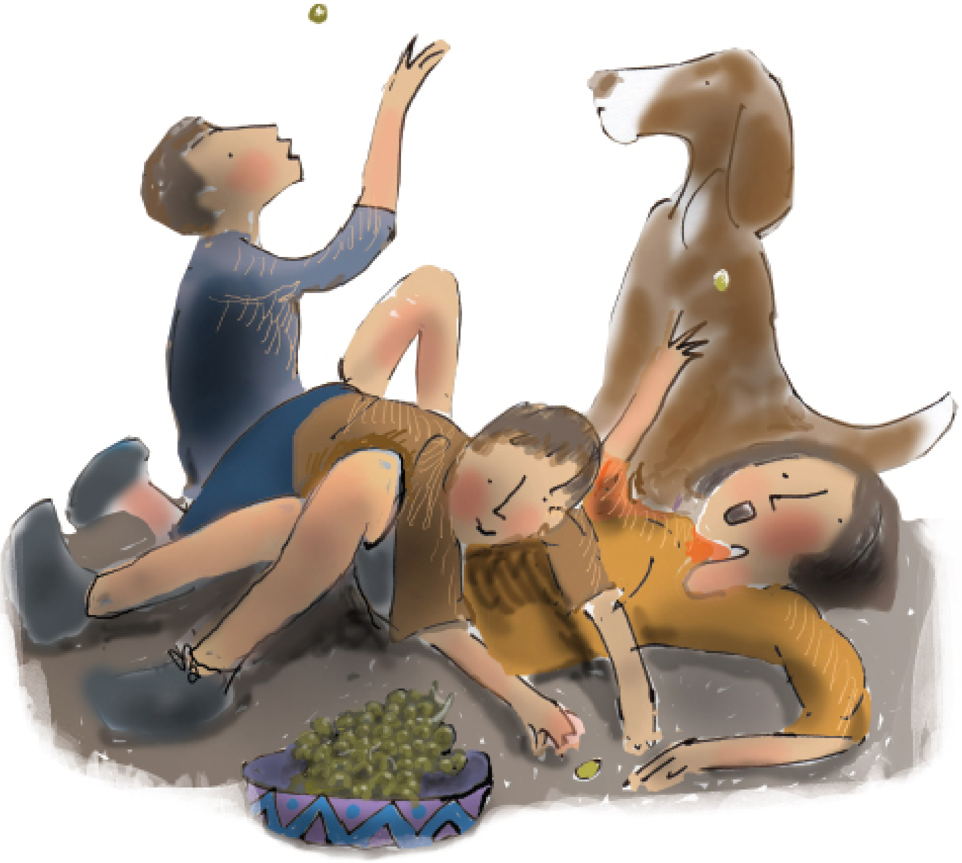


Suddenly I realise how far we are from home. But Dad always says, *If you get lost, just head back up the hill*, and sure enough, I can still see the roof of our house over the trees.

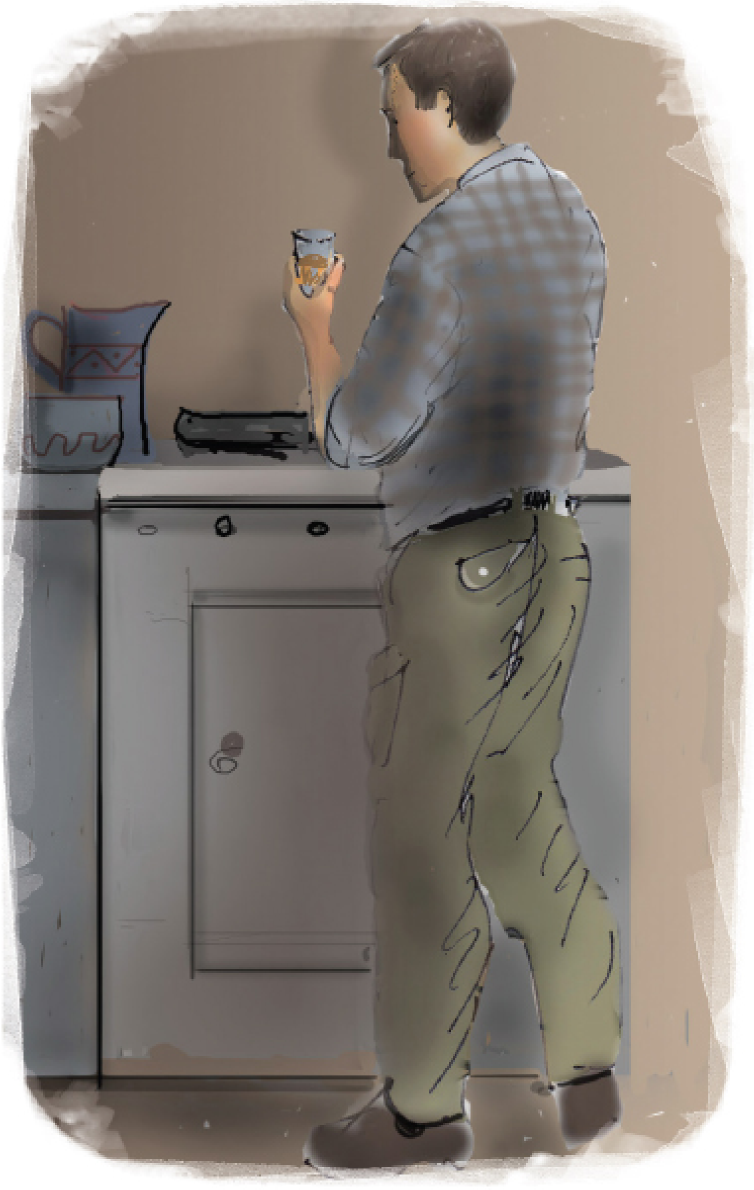


Back home, we’re too hot to play anymore. We lie on the kitchen floor, trying to catch grapes in our mouths. Mum and Dad are outside collecting fallen branches.

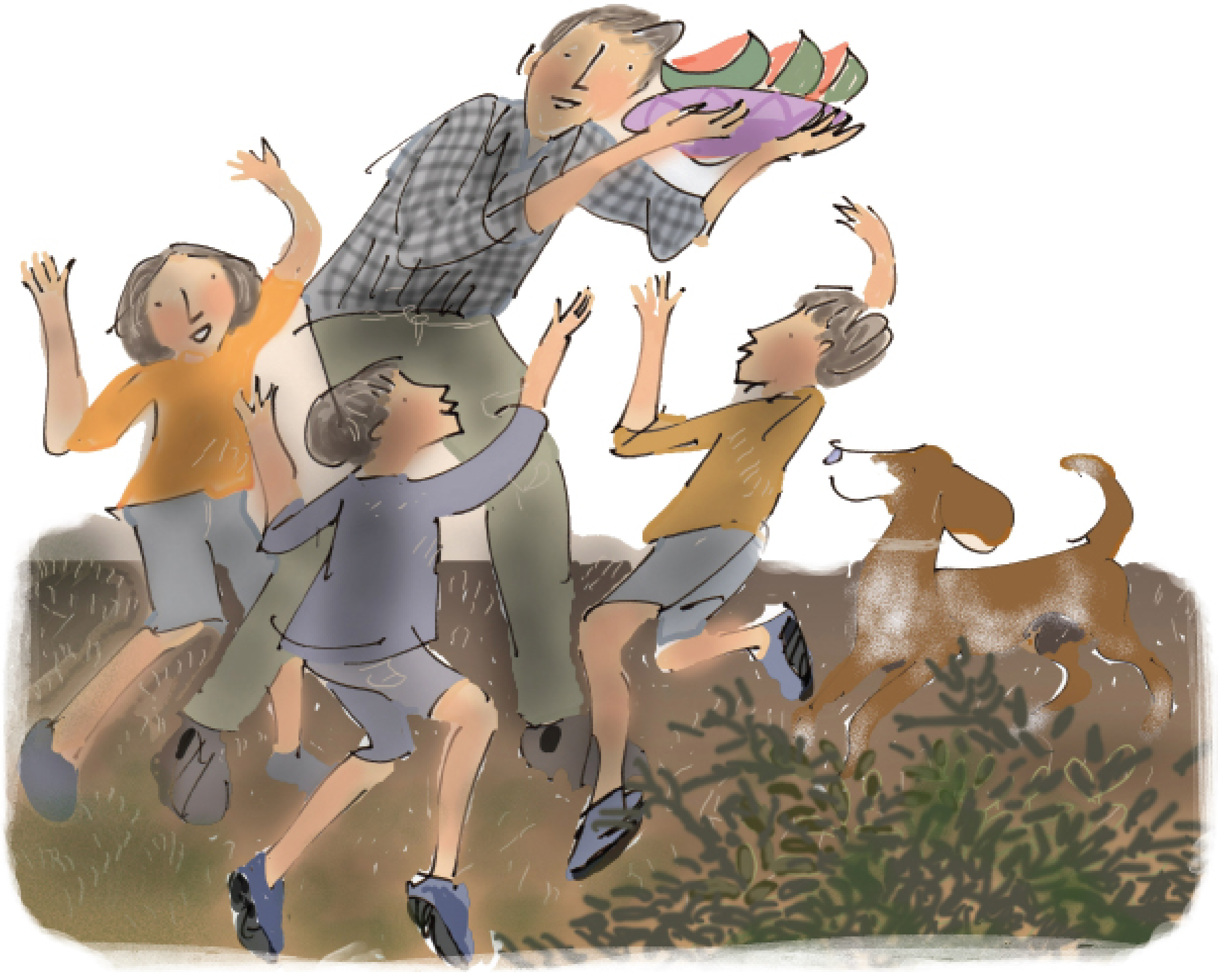




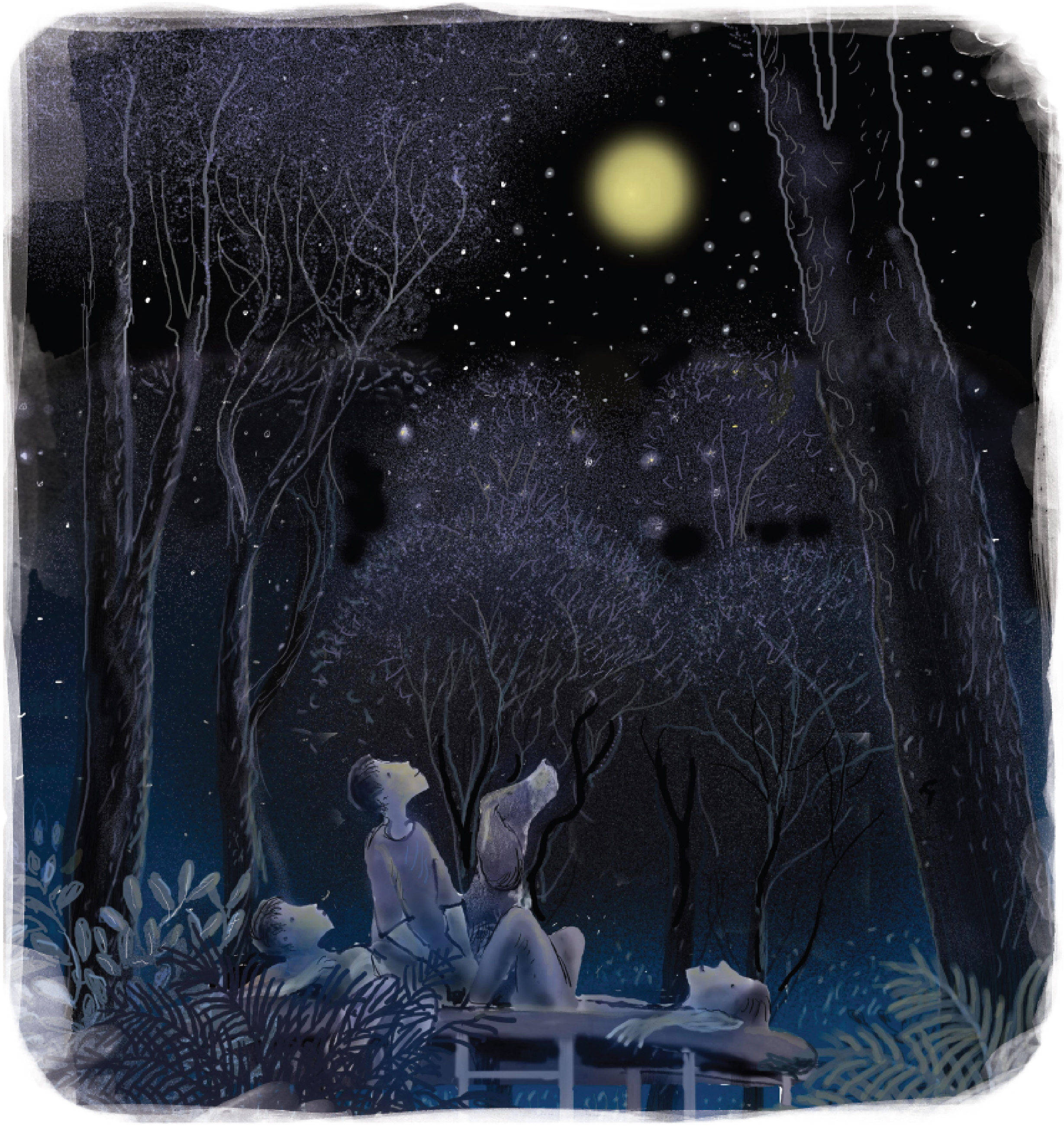
Afternoon blurs into evening, and Mum keeps working in the garden while Dad heads to the kitchen. He holds a glass of whiskey in one hand, wooden spoon in the other, stirring a pot of onions over the stove. Music escapes through the screen door.



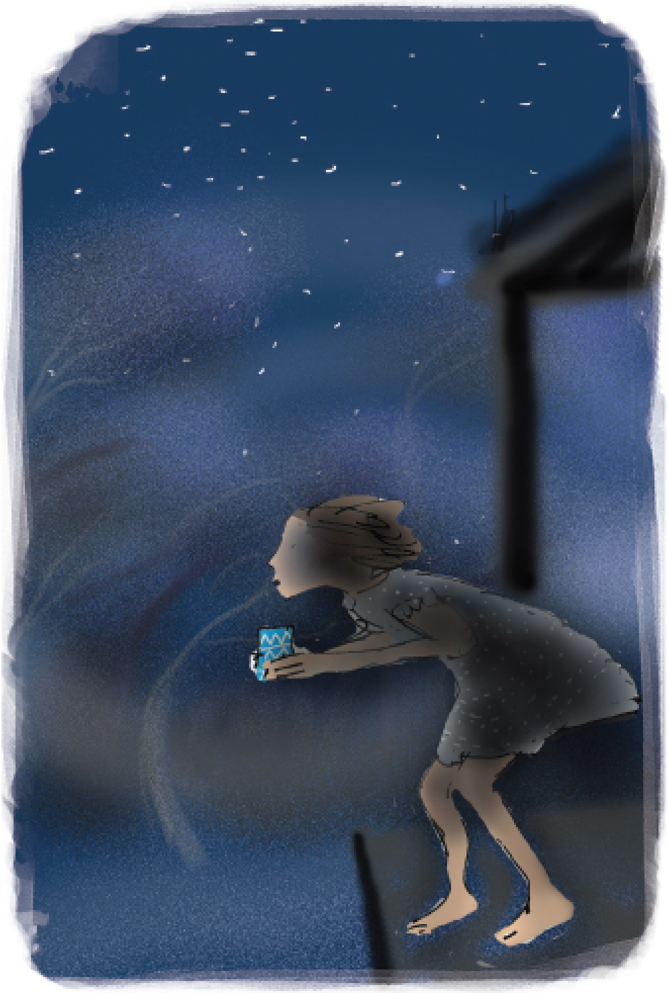
After dinner Dad brings us a big plate of watermelon and we eat it lying on the front lawn, juice dripping everywhere.



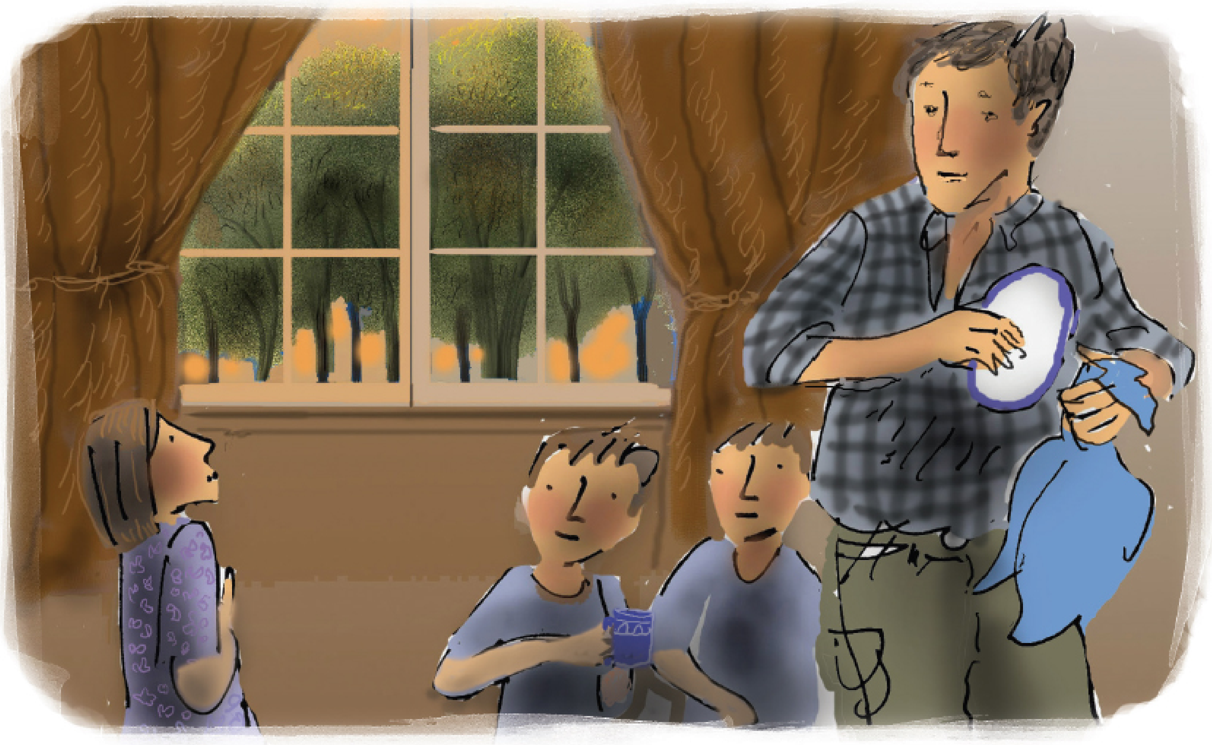
As dusk creeps in, we stretch out on the trampoline, telling secrets under the vast black sky and its endless stars. The night's so quiet we can hear Mum and Dad's voices coming from inside. The heat of the day hangs thick in the air.



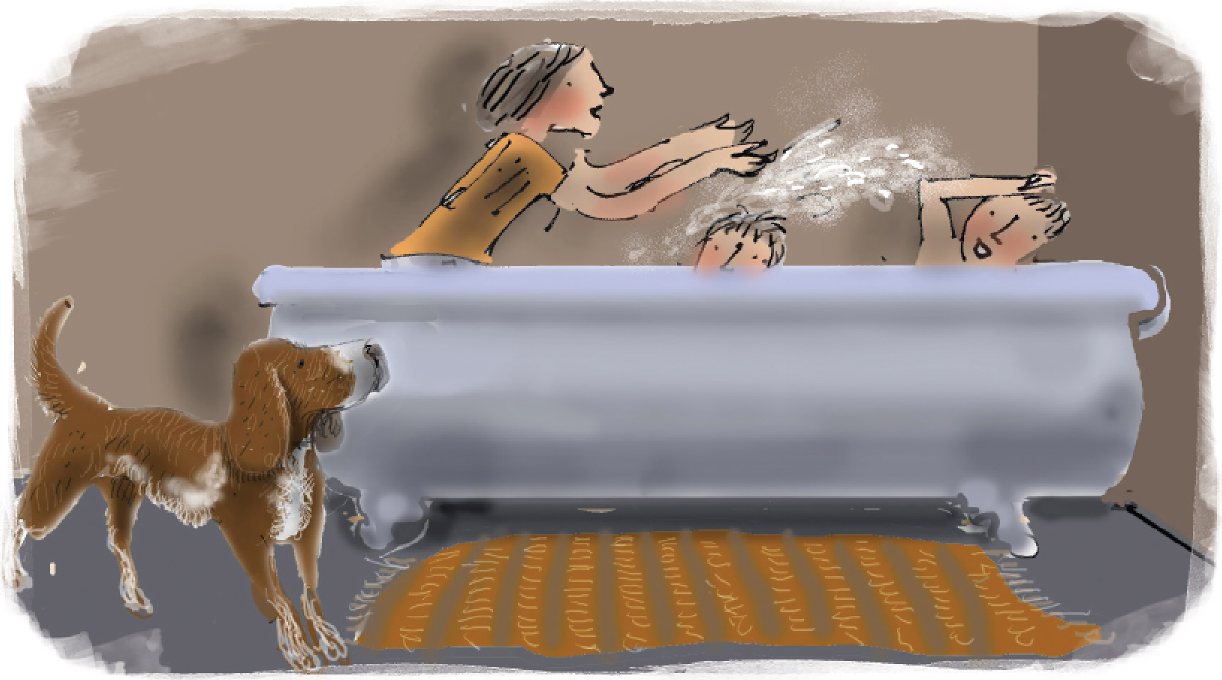
IT'S STILL DARK when I wake up. My head hurts and I'm desperately thirsty. I stand barefoot on the porch with a glass of water, and I can feel a hot wind growing stronger in the darkness around me. I go back to bed and fall into an uneasy sleep.

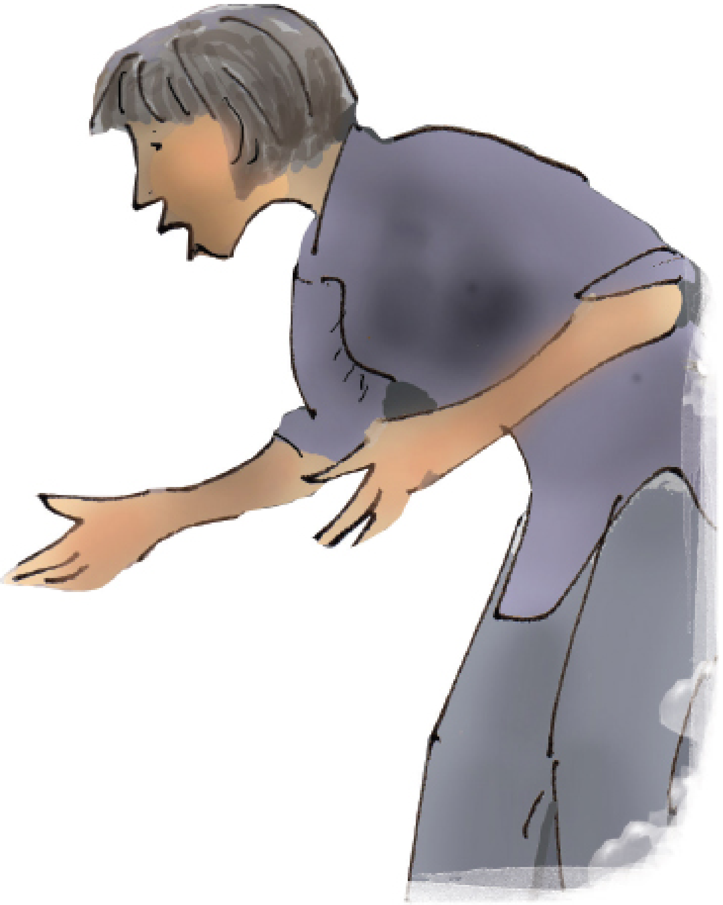


When I wake again, the day is hotter than any I've ever felt. 'No school today, sweetie,' Dad says. 'Too hot.' He doesn't look like he's slept much either.

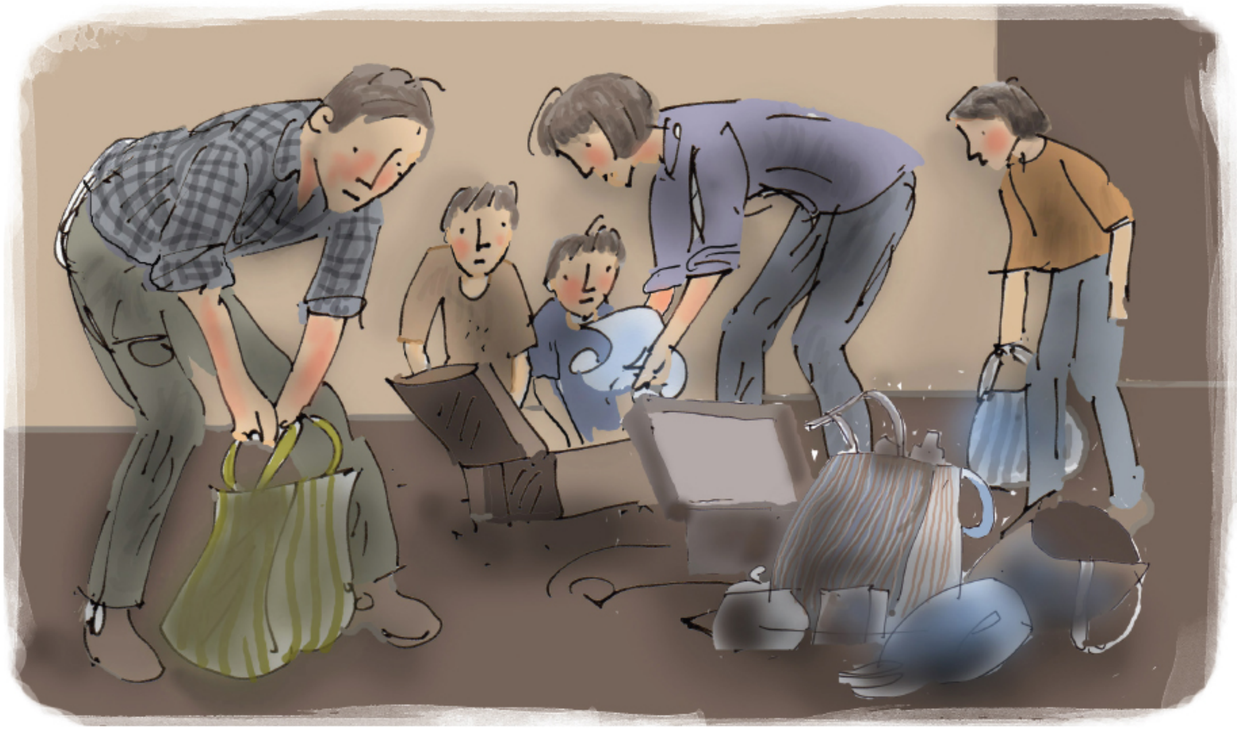


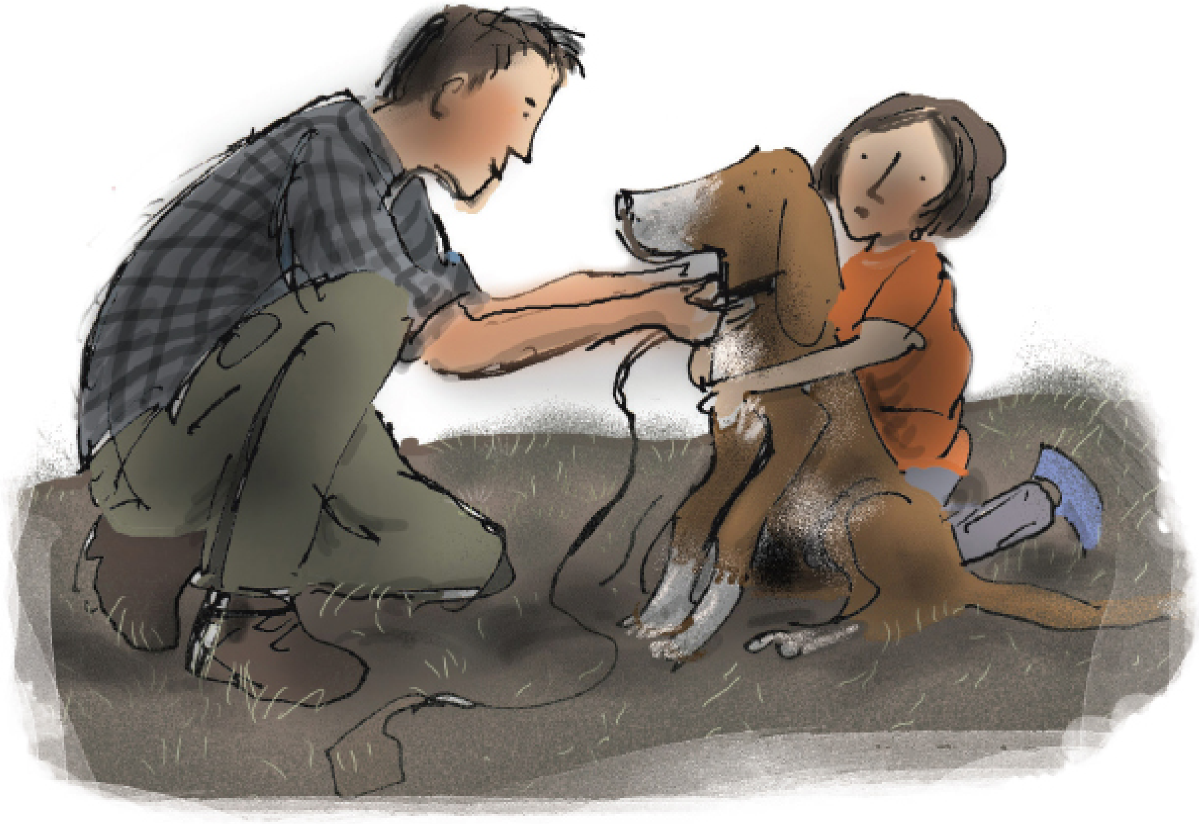
Mum runs us a cold bath and me and the boys muck around for ages, drenching the bathroom. Mum and Dad go back and forth between the yard and the kitchen, clearing branches and hovering by the radio, turning up the volume as the wind starts to howl outside. The phone rings again and again. Suddenly Mum appears. Her face looks strange. ‘There’s a fire coming,’ she says. ‘We need to move quickly.’



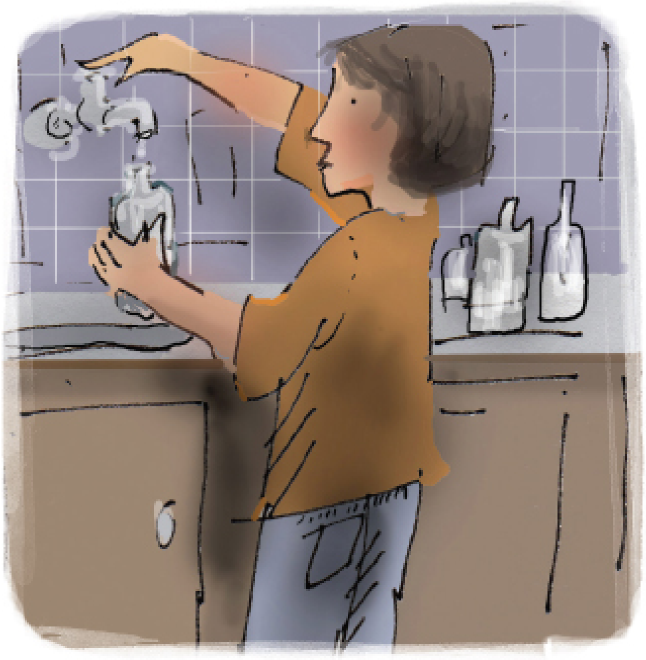


Mum and Dad start packing bags, grabbing woollen blankets, the first-aid kit, torches, and then the photo albums. Dad puts Ruby on her lead and ties her up near the back door. My chest feels hollow, like a birdcage.

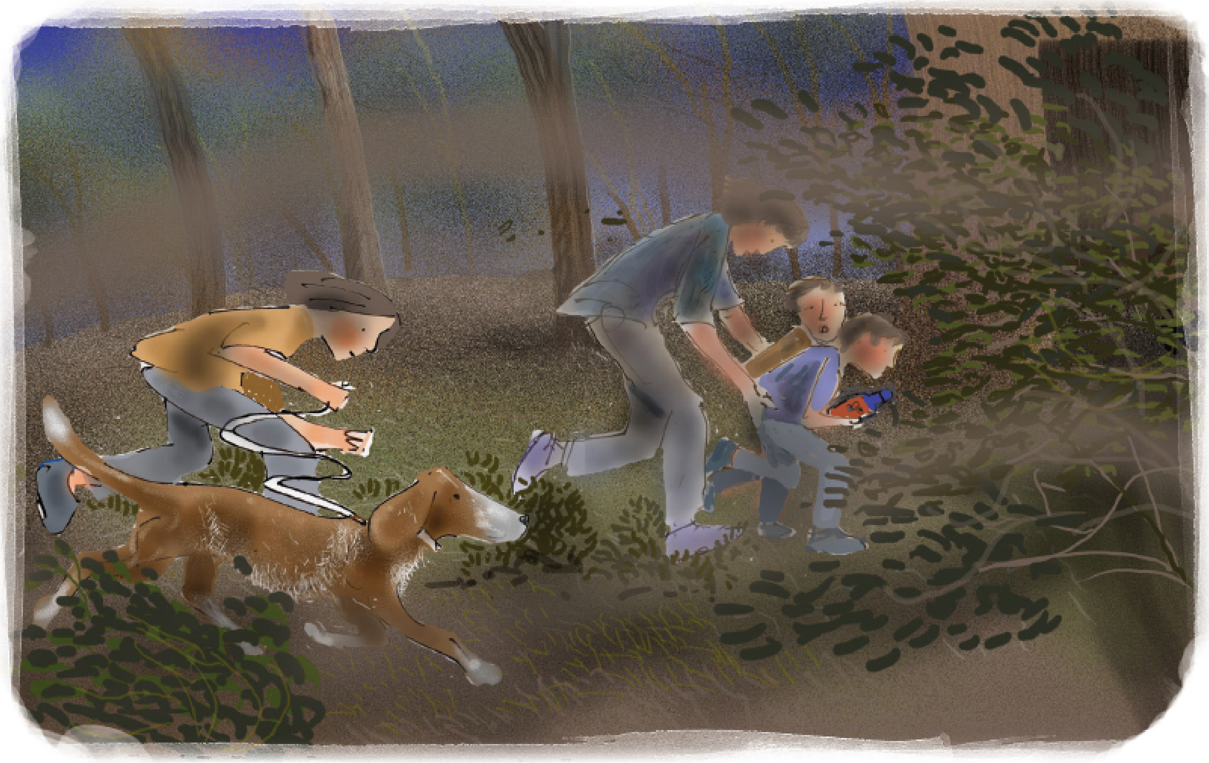


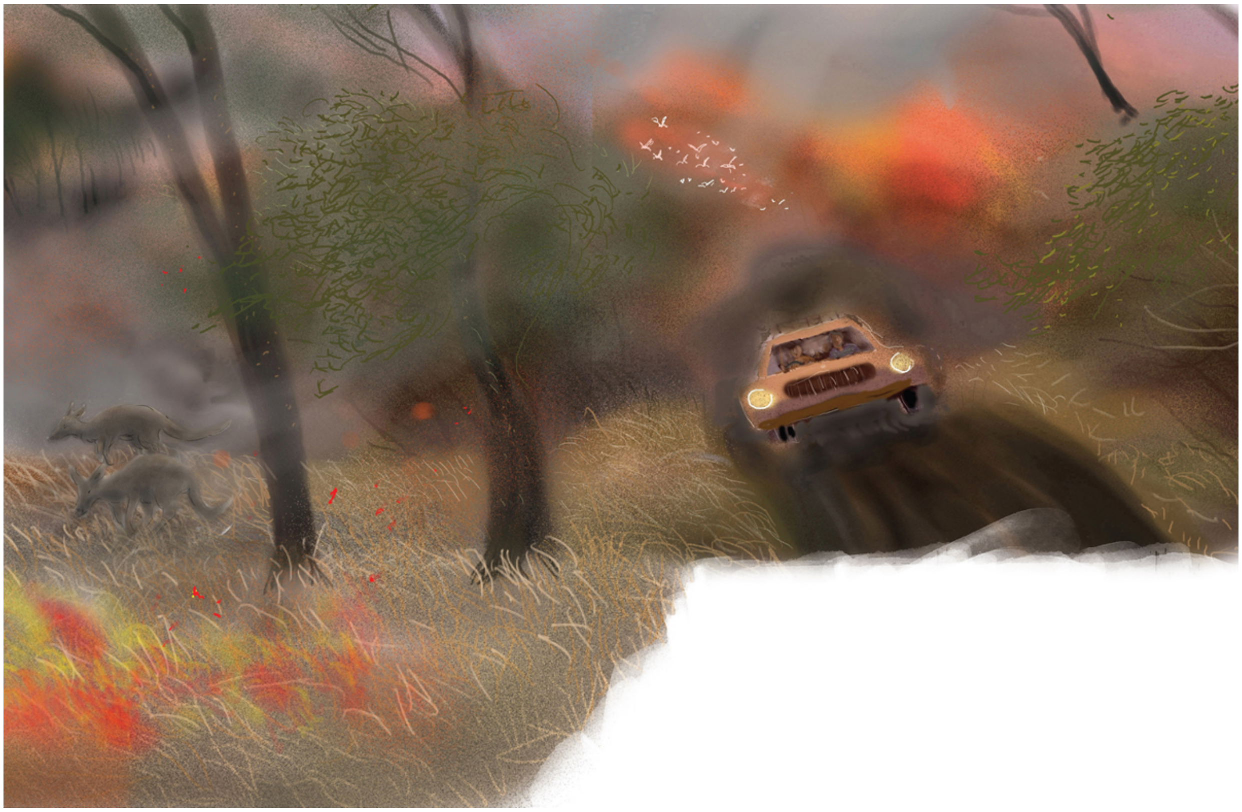


‘Fill up all the drink bottles you can find,’ Mum says to me. My brothers cling to the back of my shirt, and my hands shake as I fill the bottles.



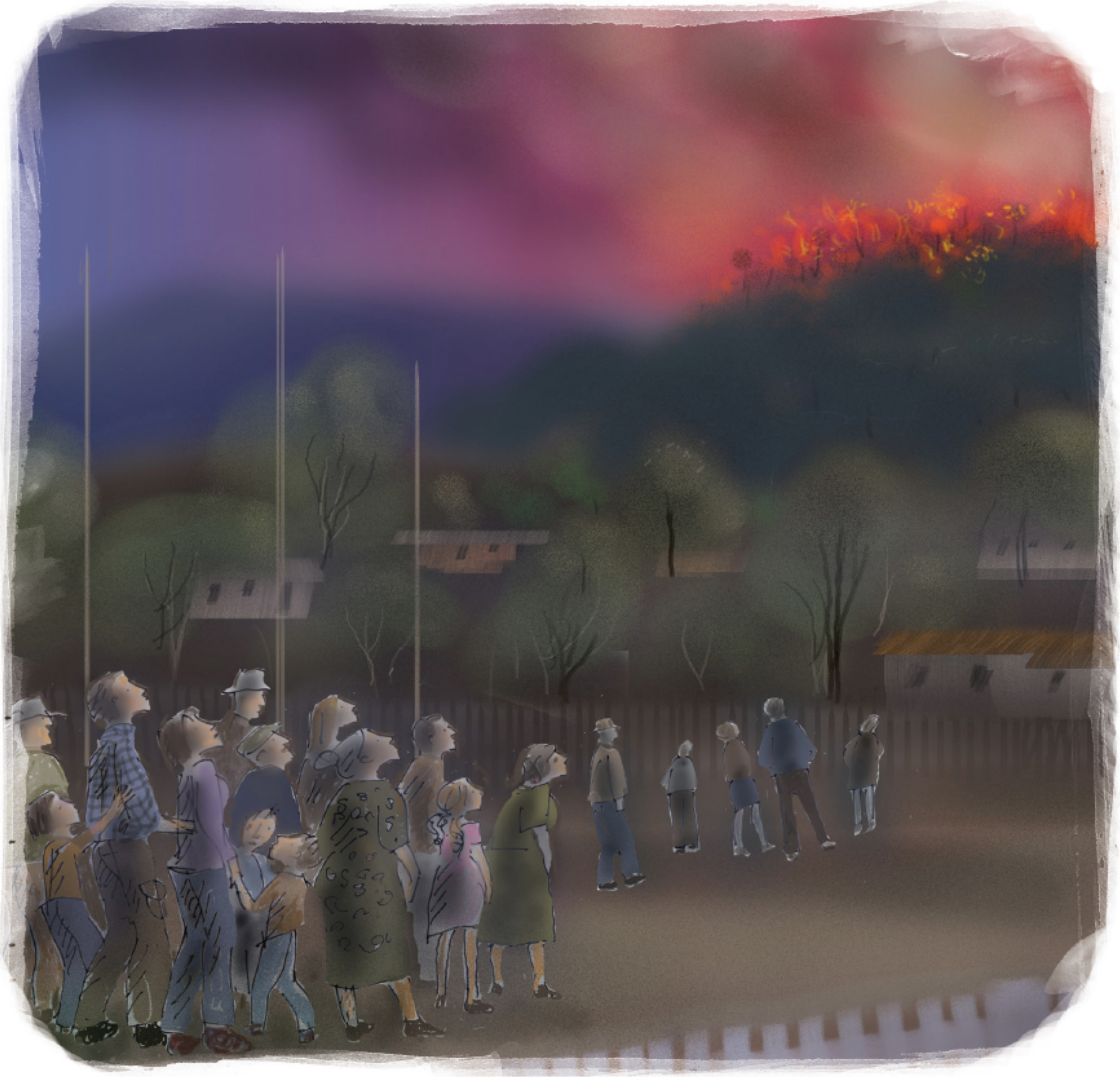
The radio is loud, but the wind is louder, and the phone rings but no one answers it. Dad bangs in and out through the screen door, carrying bags, and Mum pushes me and the boys towards the garage, grabbing Ruby on the way. As we tumble out of the house, the air scorches the back of my throat and stings my eyes. The wind whips at us, and the screen door slams.

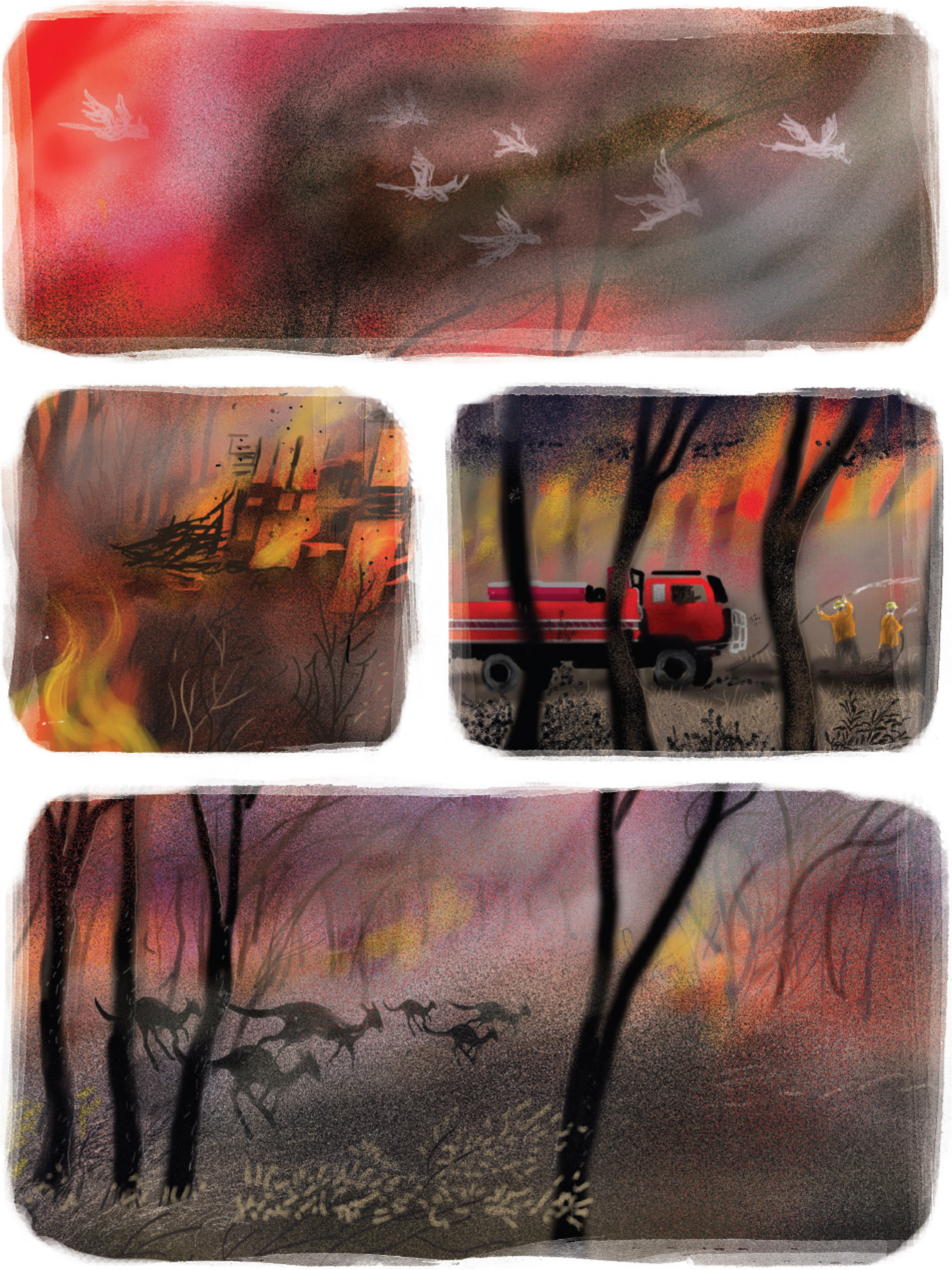




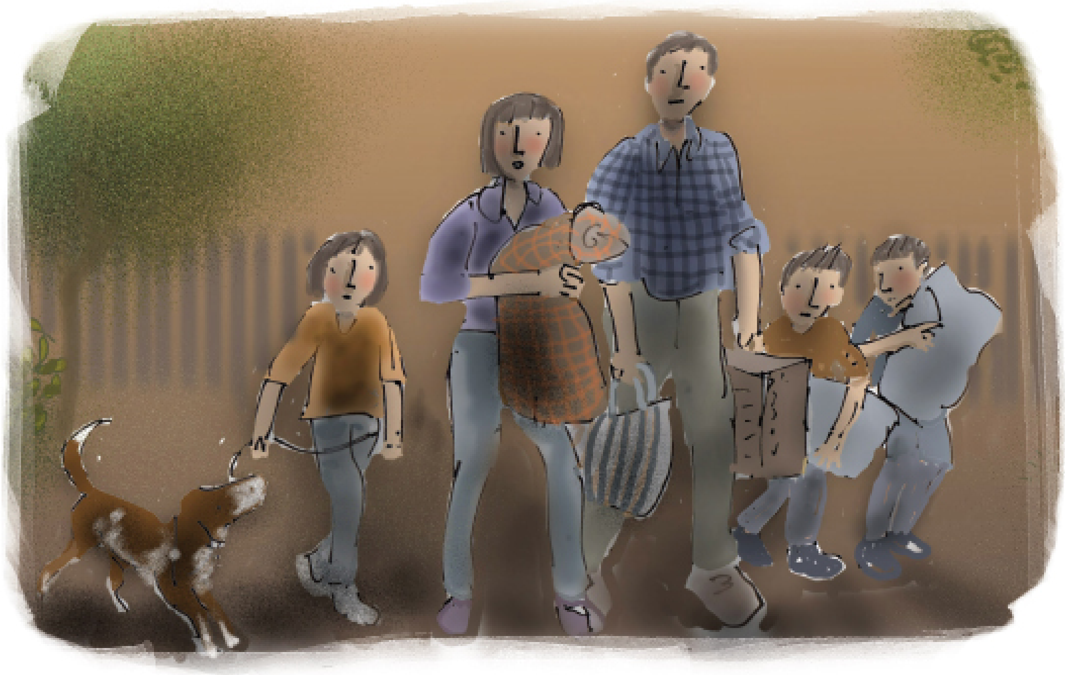
THE DRIVE DOWN the mountain hides away in the back of my memories. There is the fierce wind, the crashing of things hitting the car, the skidding of tyres, crying, Dad swearing. And smoke, everywhere the smell of smoke.

In town Mum buys us hot chips, but no one eats any. The sky looks strange, dark and glowing, and there is a distant roaring sound, like an aeroplane approaching. We walk to the oval and from there we can see the whole mountain, covered in fire.

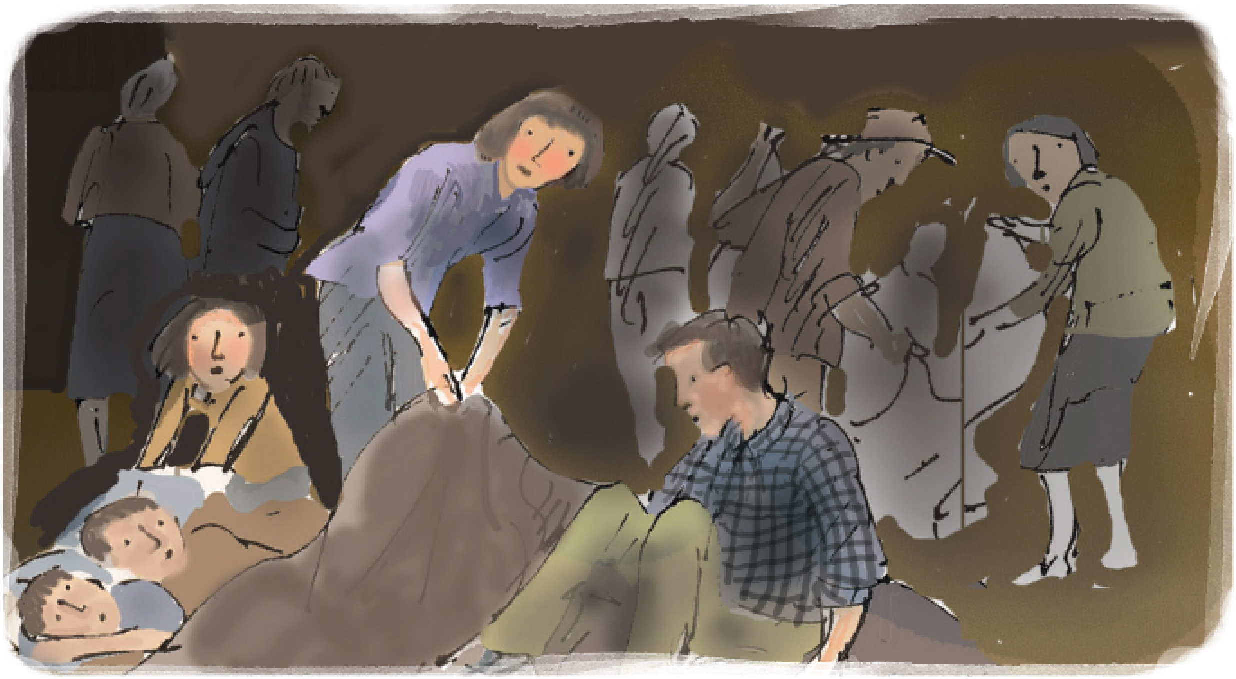




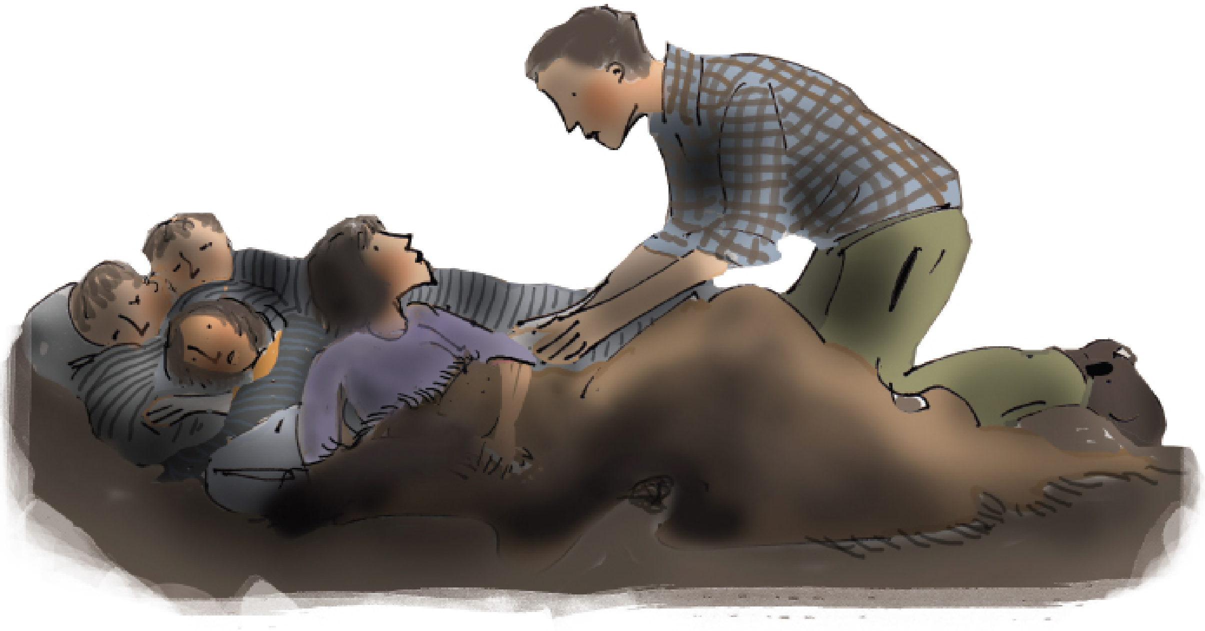
IN THE EVENING we go to the community centre next to the oval. There are dogs tied up everywhere outside, and cats in crates or loose in the back seats of cars. Lots of kids from school are here too, and the twins run around like wild things.



Inside, families are laying out blankets and coats to sleep on. Mum finds us a spot in the corner. It's hot and noisy, but the boys fall straight to sleep. I think I can hear Ruby barking from where she's tied up outside.

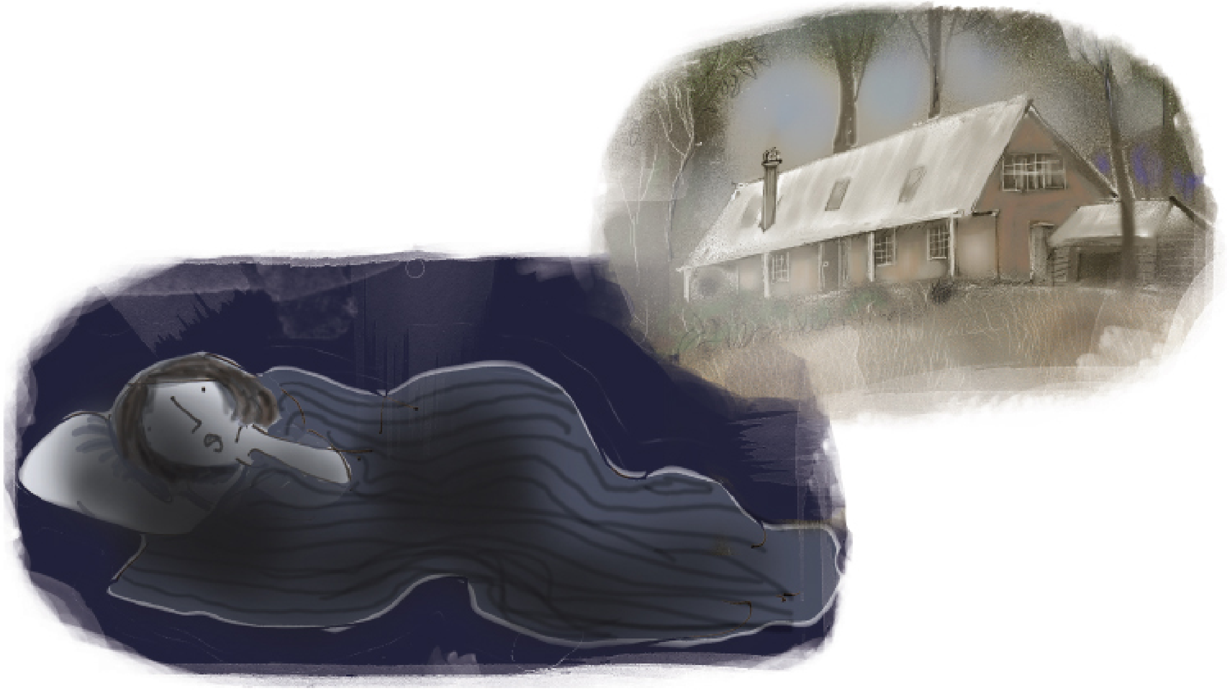


When I wake it's light outside, and my mouth tastes like dust. 'What do you mean, gone?' I hear Mum whisper. There's a pause. I stay very still.

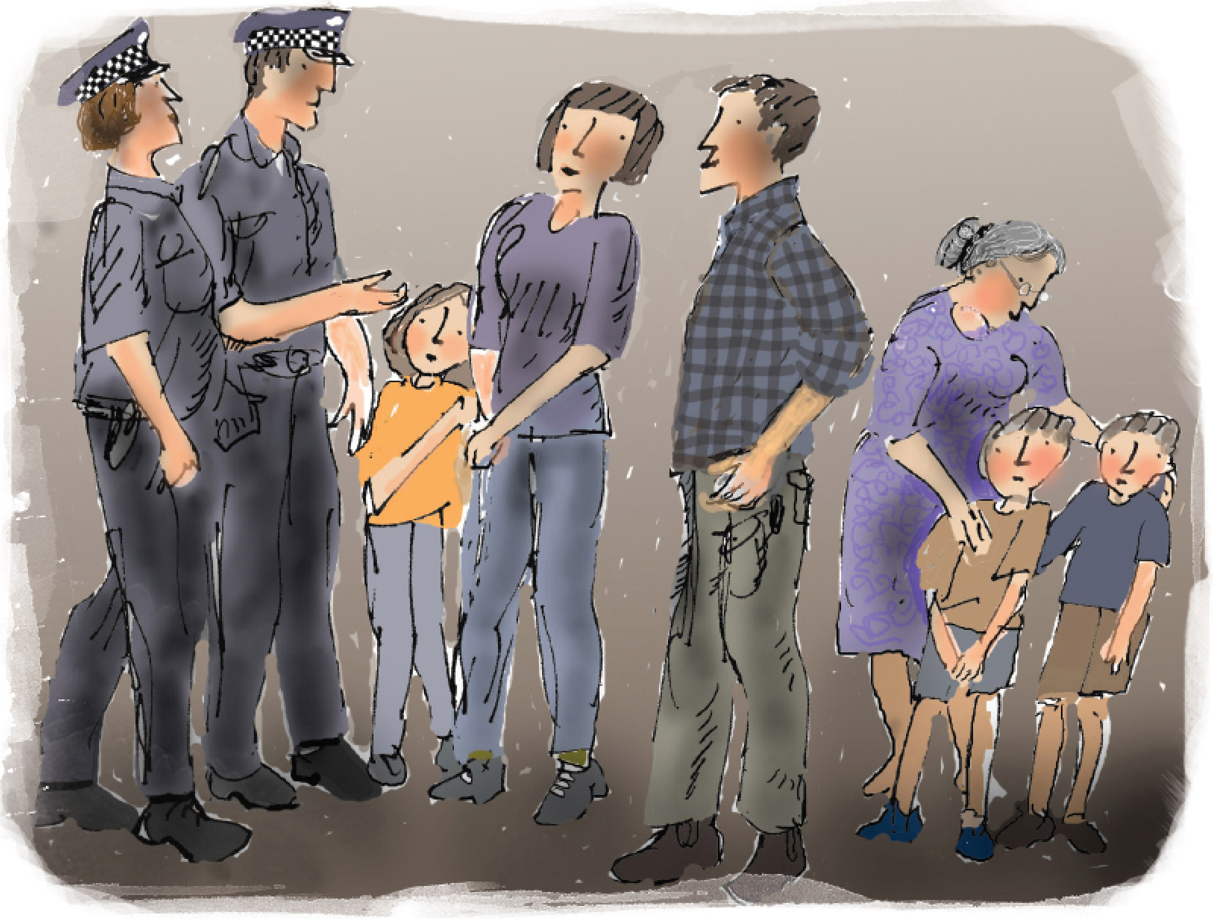


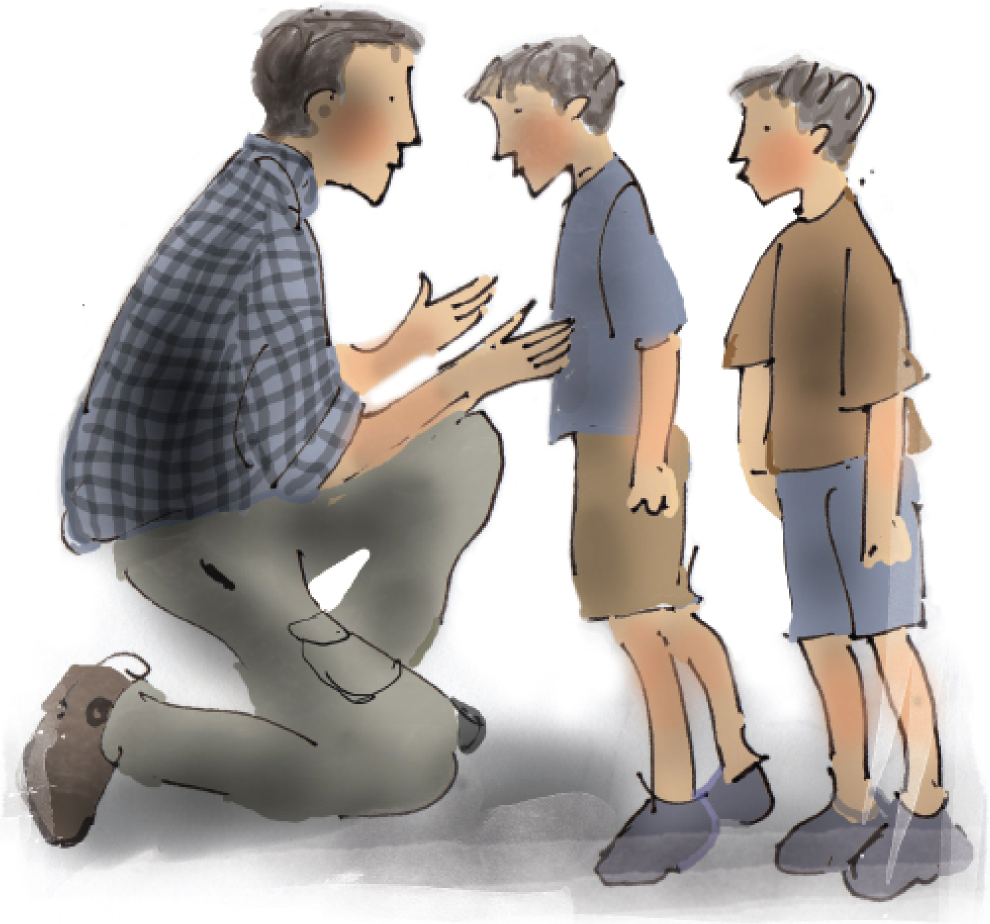
'It's gone, love,' Dad whispers. 'The fire got it.'

I close my eyes again, my heart pounding. I can see our house in the blackness, surrounded by trees. I dig my knuckles into my closed eyes, trying to stop the image from disappearing.

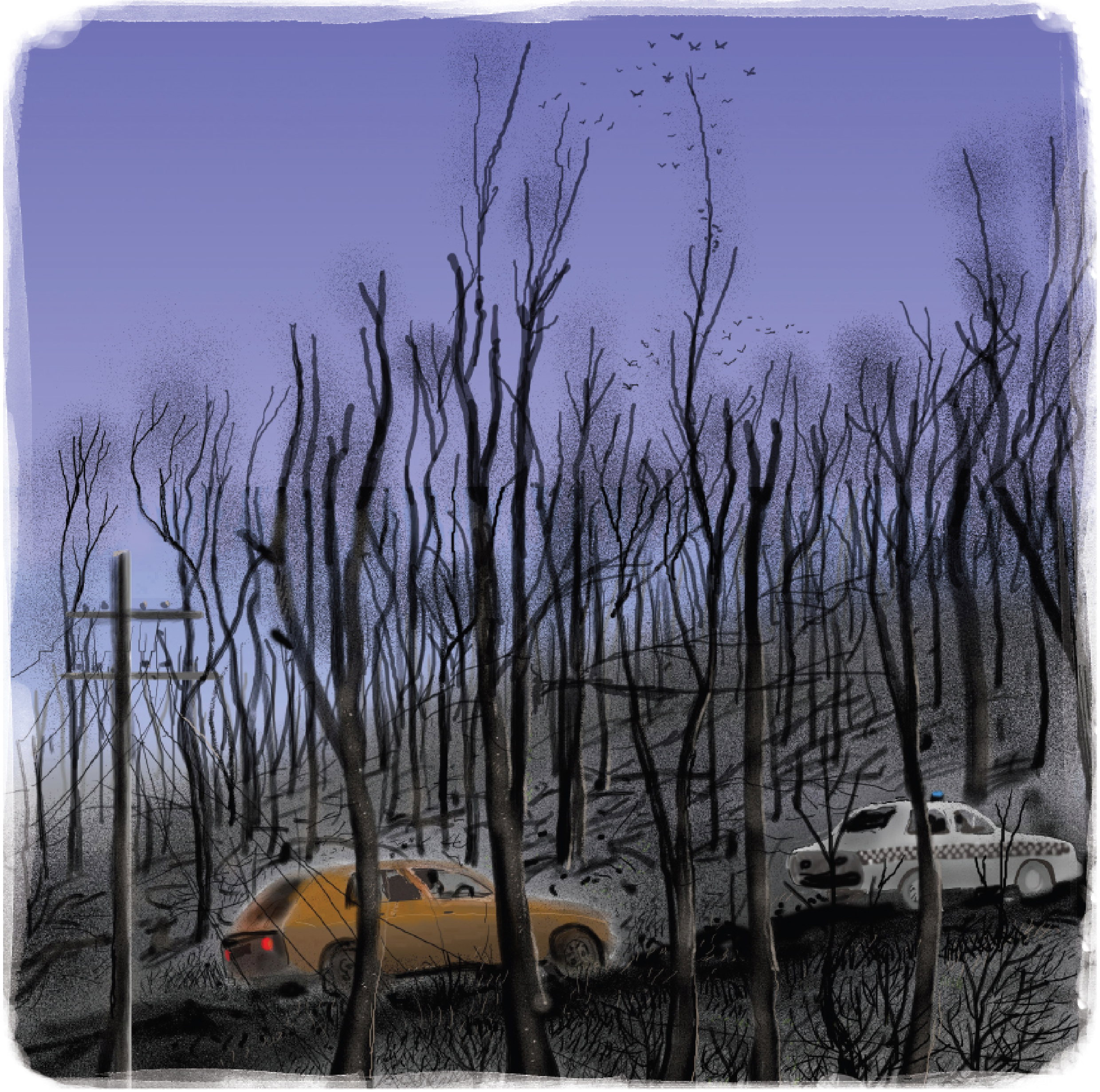


It’s not until weeks after the fire that we go back up the mountain. Two police meet us outside Nana’s house, where we’ve been staying, and we follow their car up. The twins want to come too but Dad says not yet.

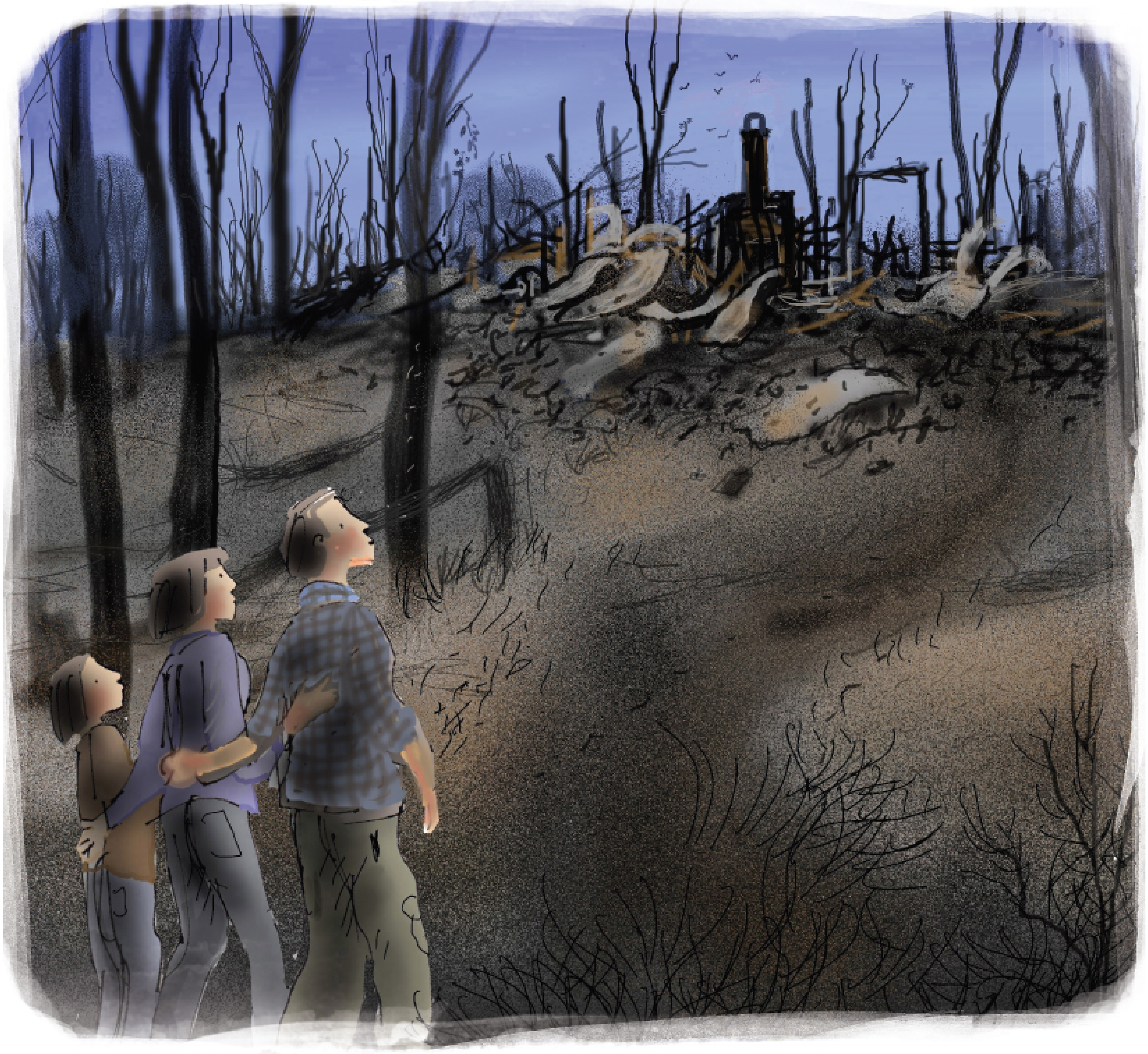




We drive in silence, with the windows down. The hills are bald, with black spikes where the trees used to be. I don’t recognise any of the old familiar turns or corners. I don’t recognise anything.

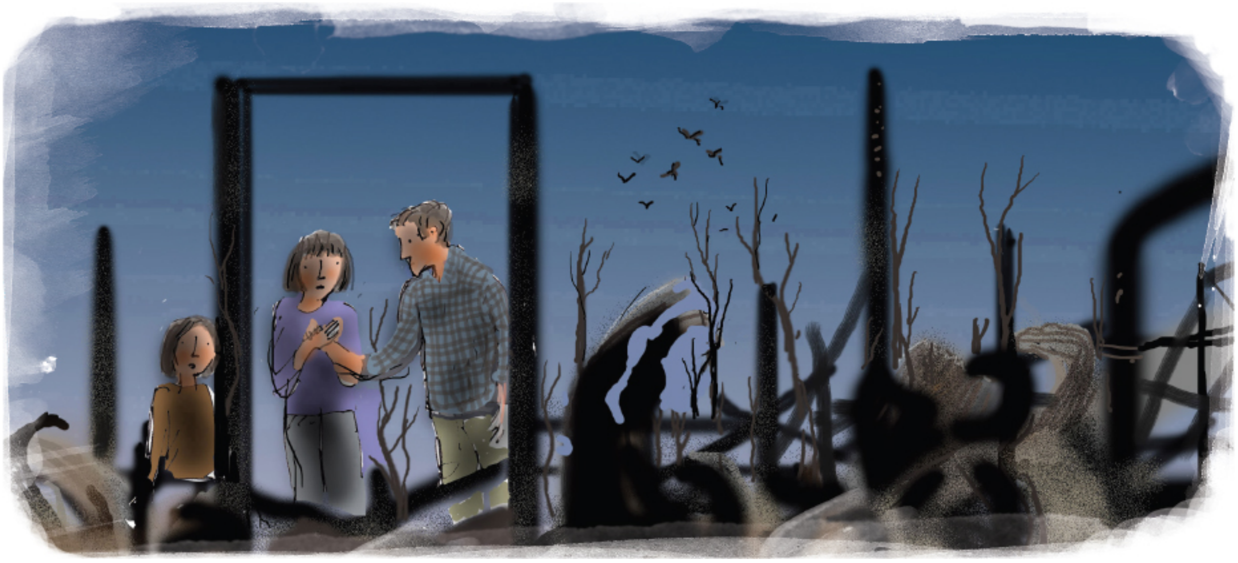


The police car stops and we pull up behind it. I’m not sure why we’ve stopped, but then Mum gasps and I realise we’re at the end of our driveway.

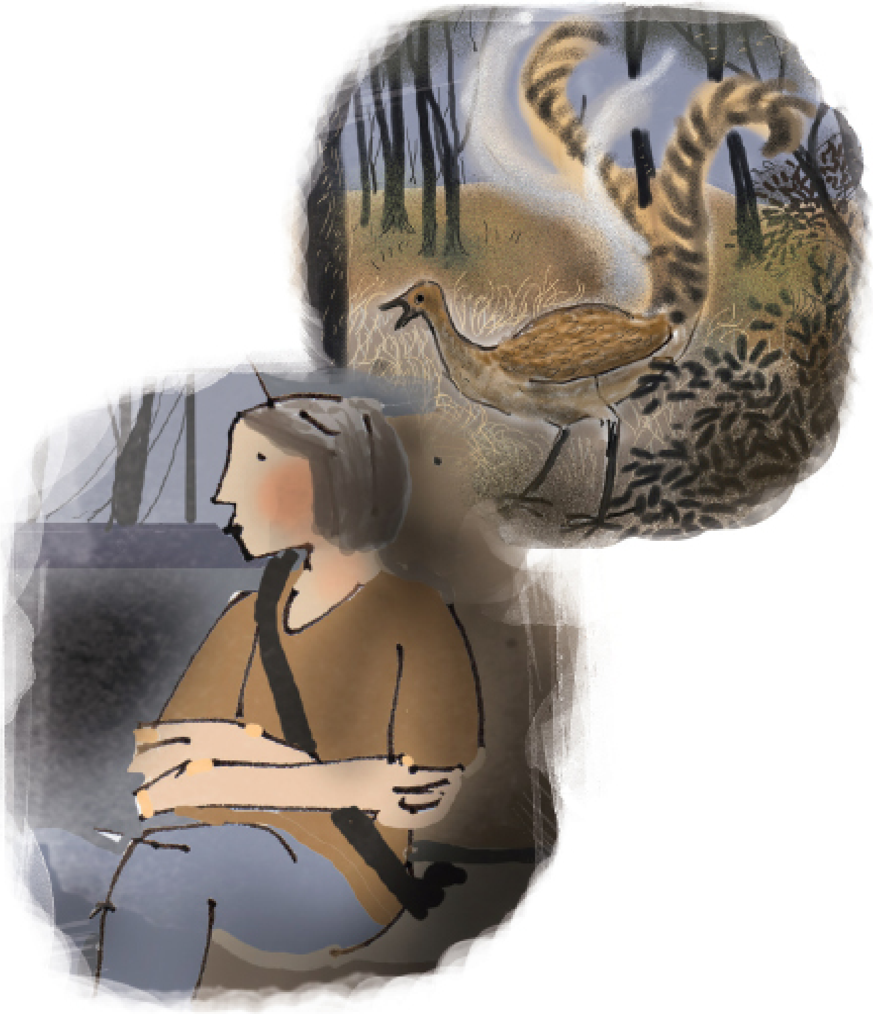


It’s like stepping into a picture book after all the colour has been drained out. The trees that are still standing are nothing but spindly fingers, reaching up towards the sky.

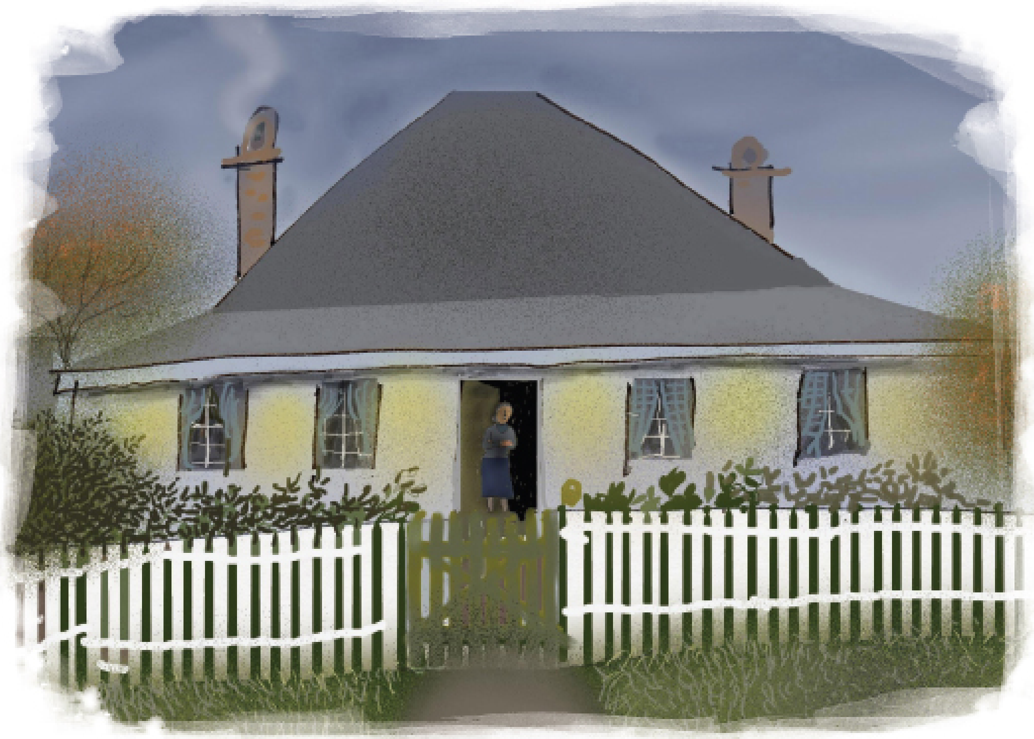
Everything is silent. We walk towards where our house used to be. It’s hard to make sense of. I don’t understand these parts that are left – strange shapes, bent metal, half walls, piles of things.

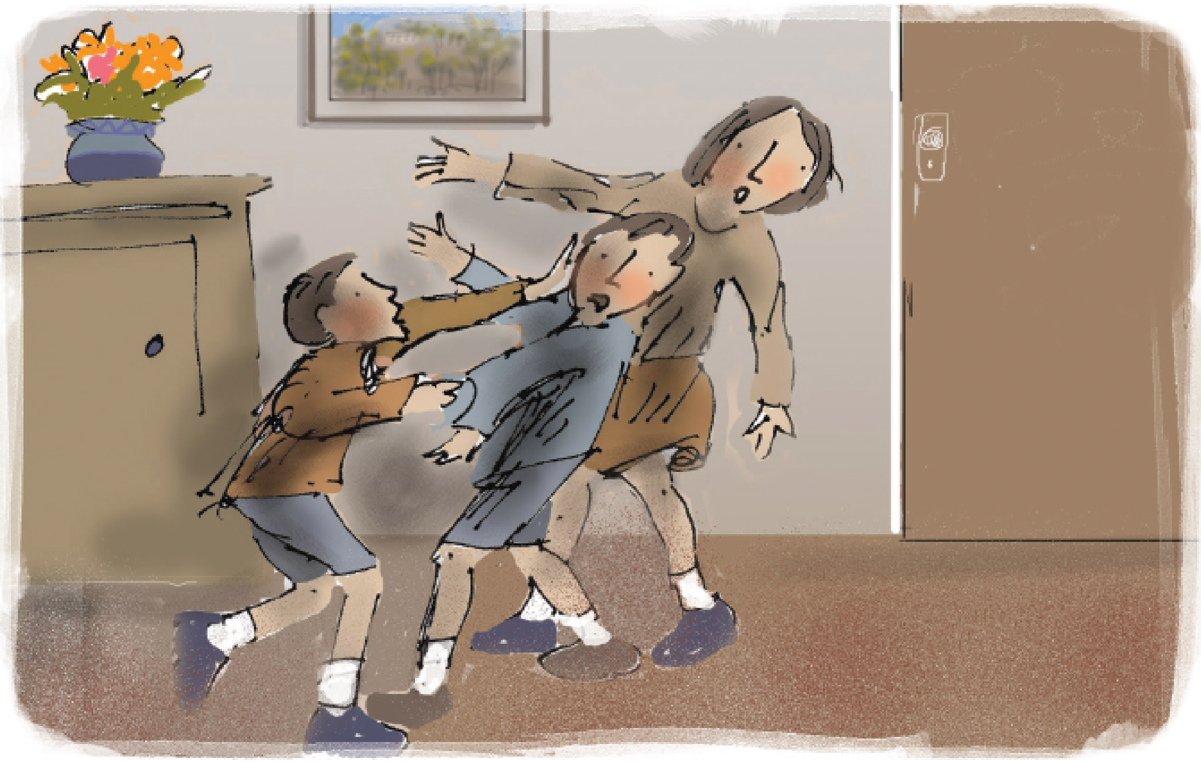


On the drive back down the mountain I gaze out at the powerlines, some still stretching across the sky, some dangling like broken guitar strings. I wonder about the lyrebirds that used to dig all around our house, singing to each other through the fog.

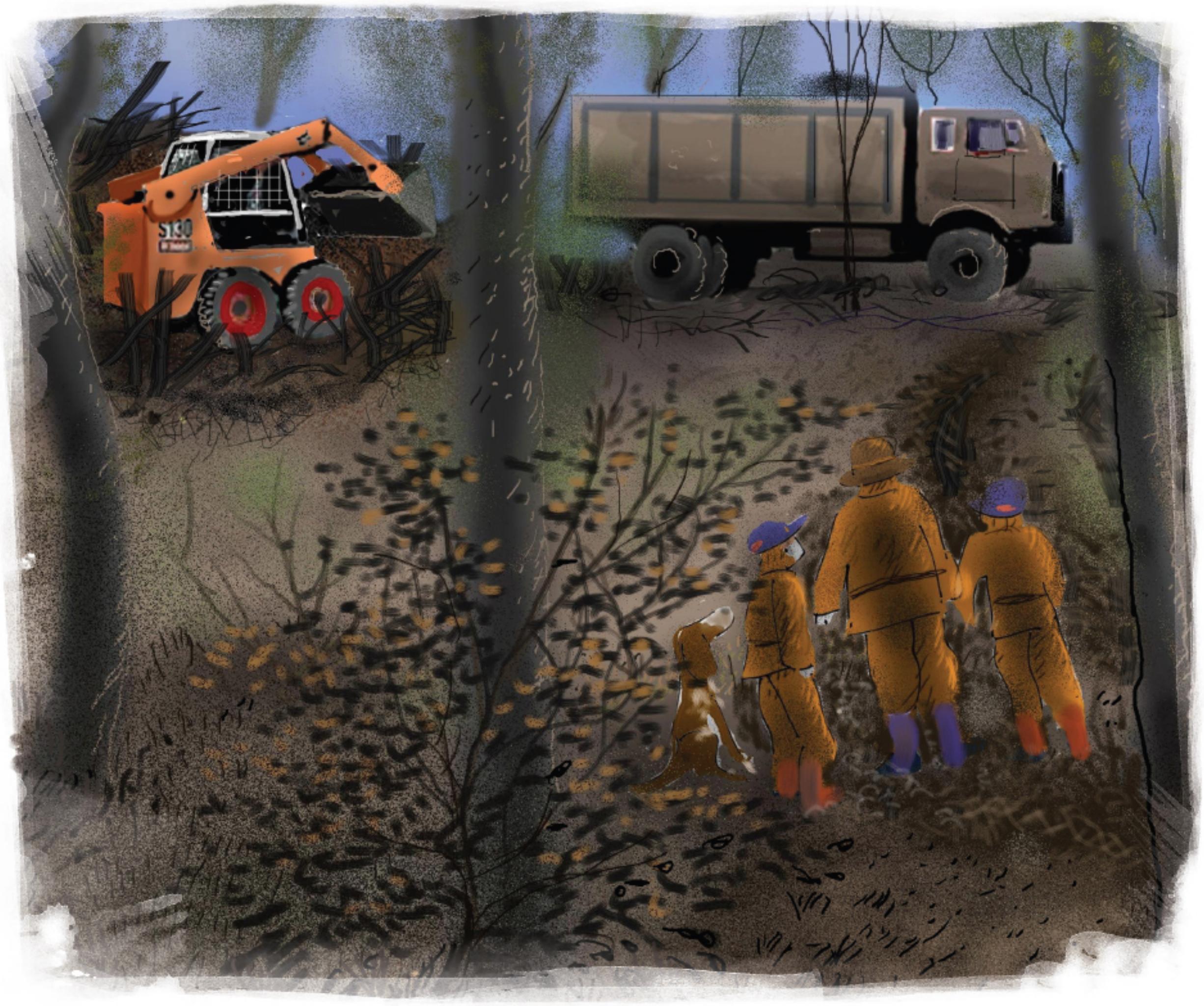


THE LEAVES REDDEN and then fall, and winter arrives as if it never left. We go back to school but stay living with Nana in her small white house at the bottom of the mountain. The stars aren't as bright. The moon doesn't seem as close. My brothers are noisy and fight a lot, and Mum and Dad argue sometimes too. Ruby is restless and follows us everywhere.

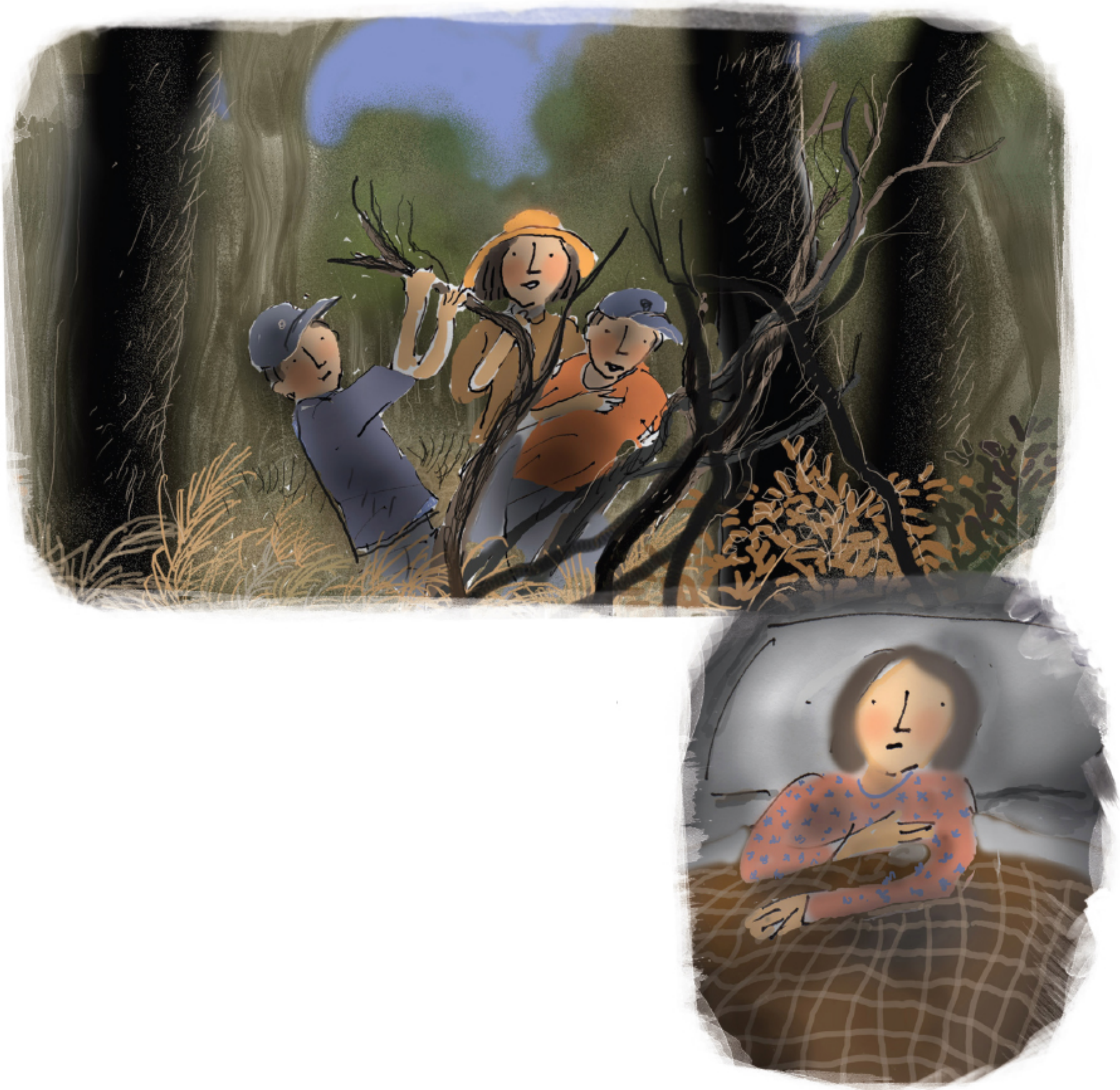




On weekends we sometimes go back up the mountain with Mum and Dad. One day we have to wear paper masks and bright-orange suits, and we watch as huge trucks swing at the remains of our house with their claws. They knock it into smaller and smaller piles before loading it up and driving it away. The rain turns the ash to grey sludge that clumps on our boots.

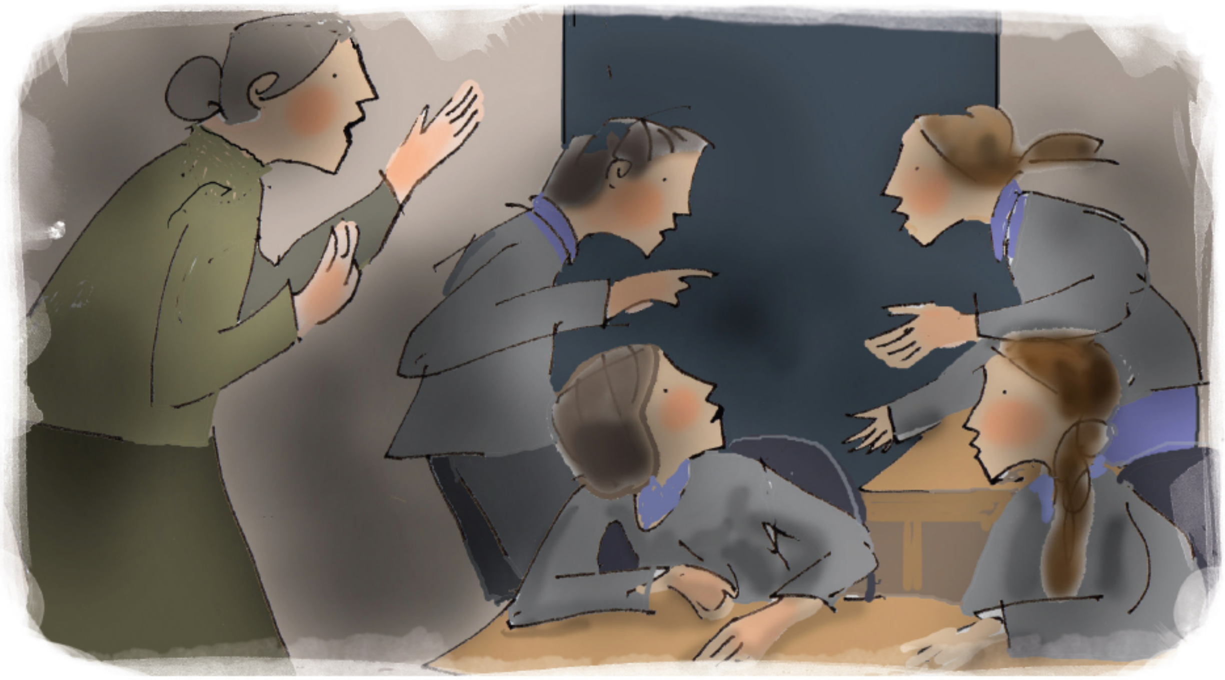


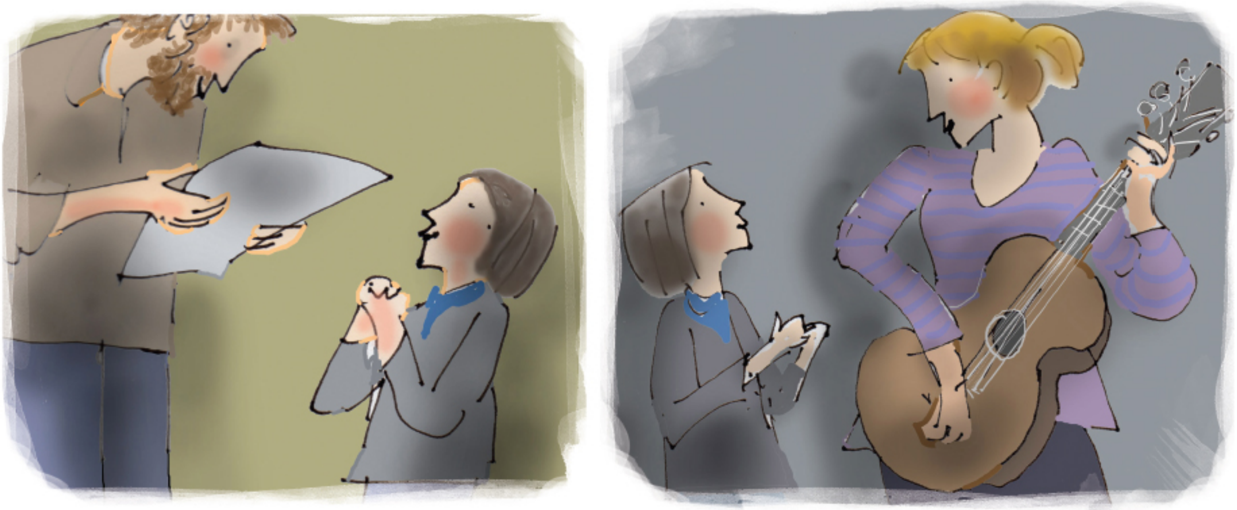
Sometimes it’s hard to fall asleep. I miss the sound of rain on the tin roof, the smell of dirt and gum leaves. I can still see our house on the mountain, strong and tall, with its triangle roof and mud-brick walls.



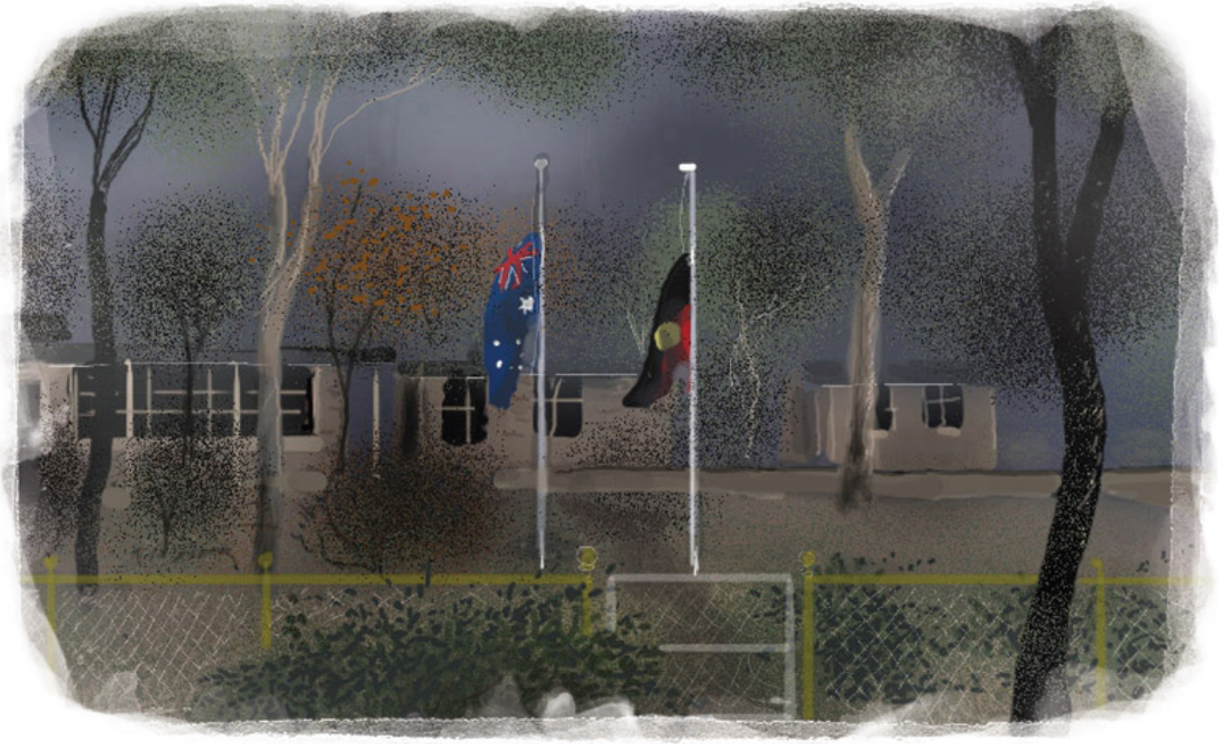
Sometimes I wake terrified from some forgotten dream, and other times I’m woken by one of my brothers crying out for Mum. There’s something inside me that’s bigger than fear or sadness – it has no words, no shape, and it turns and twists.

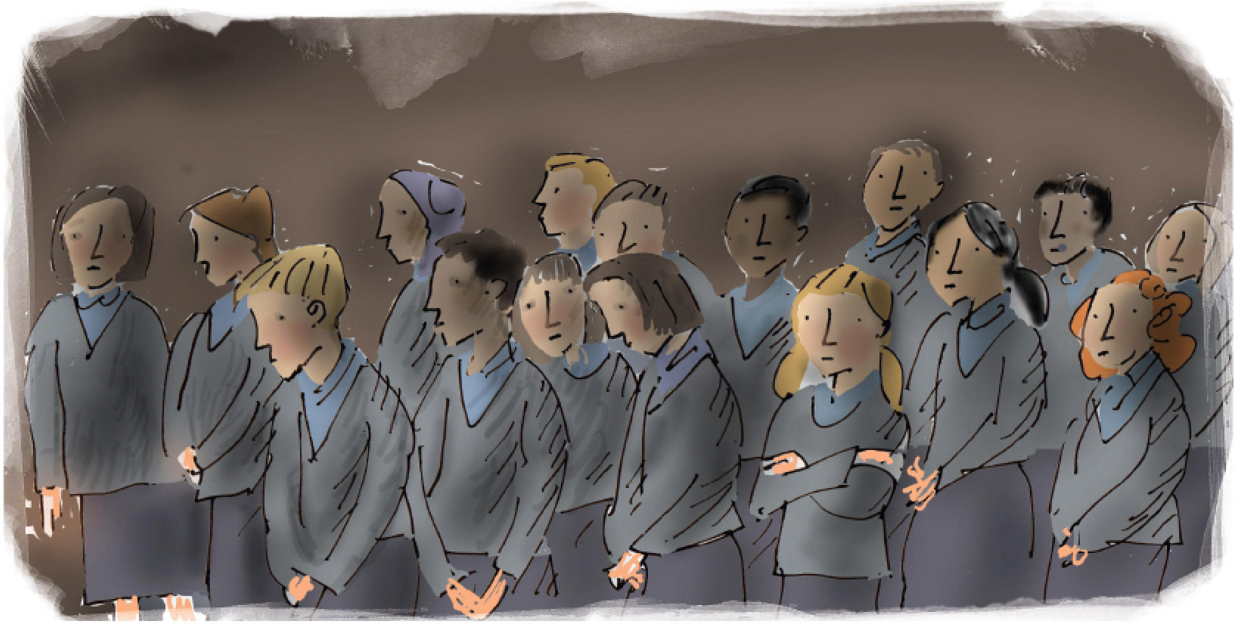
At school the teachers seem different and the kids are wilder, like dogs on a windy day. People come and go – people who want us to talk to them, who want us to draw pictures; people who play music for us.





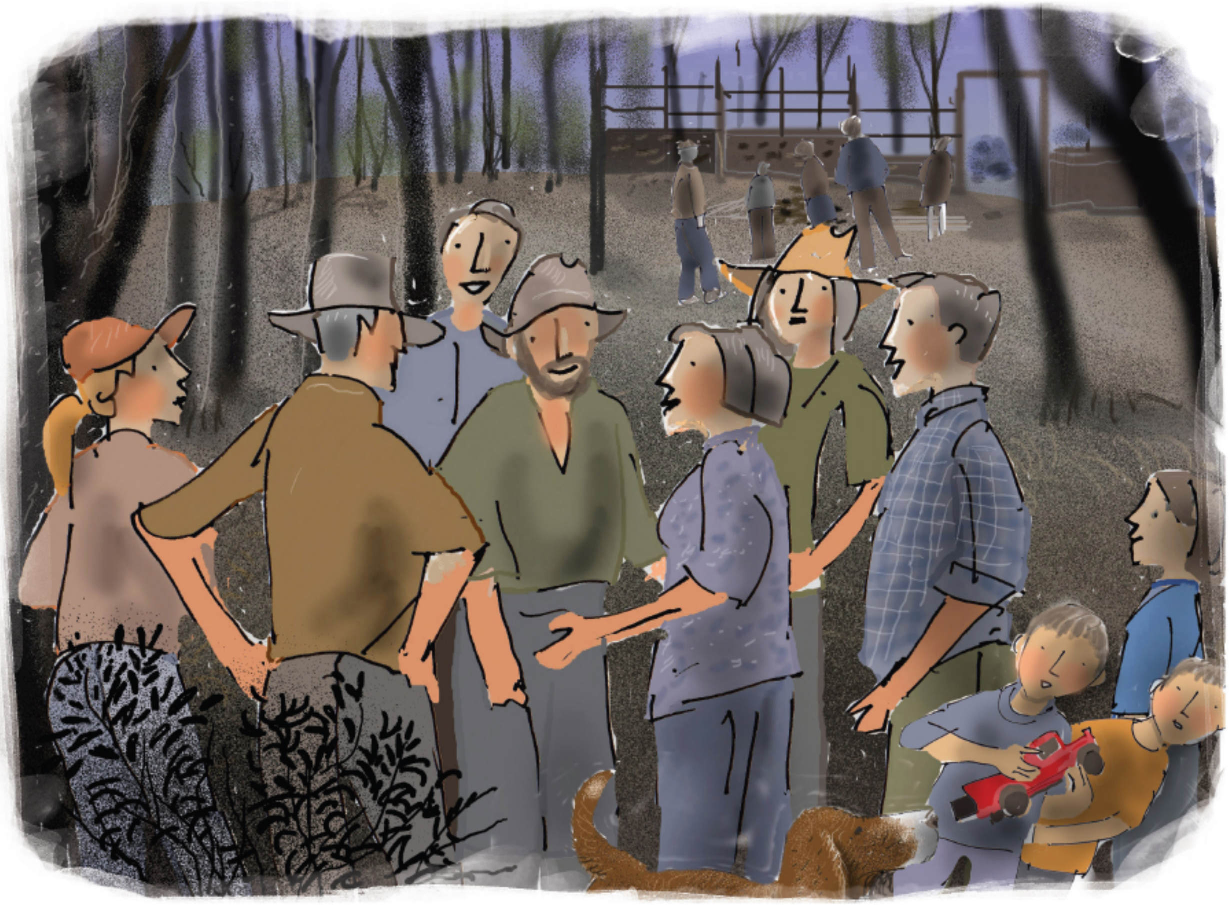
In my class there are two kids who don't come back. And in assembly we talk about all the kids and teachers and families who will never come back.



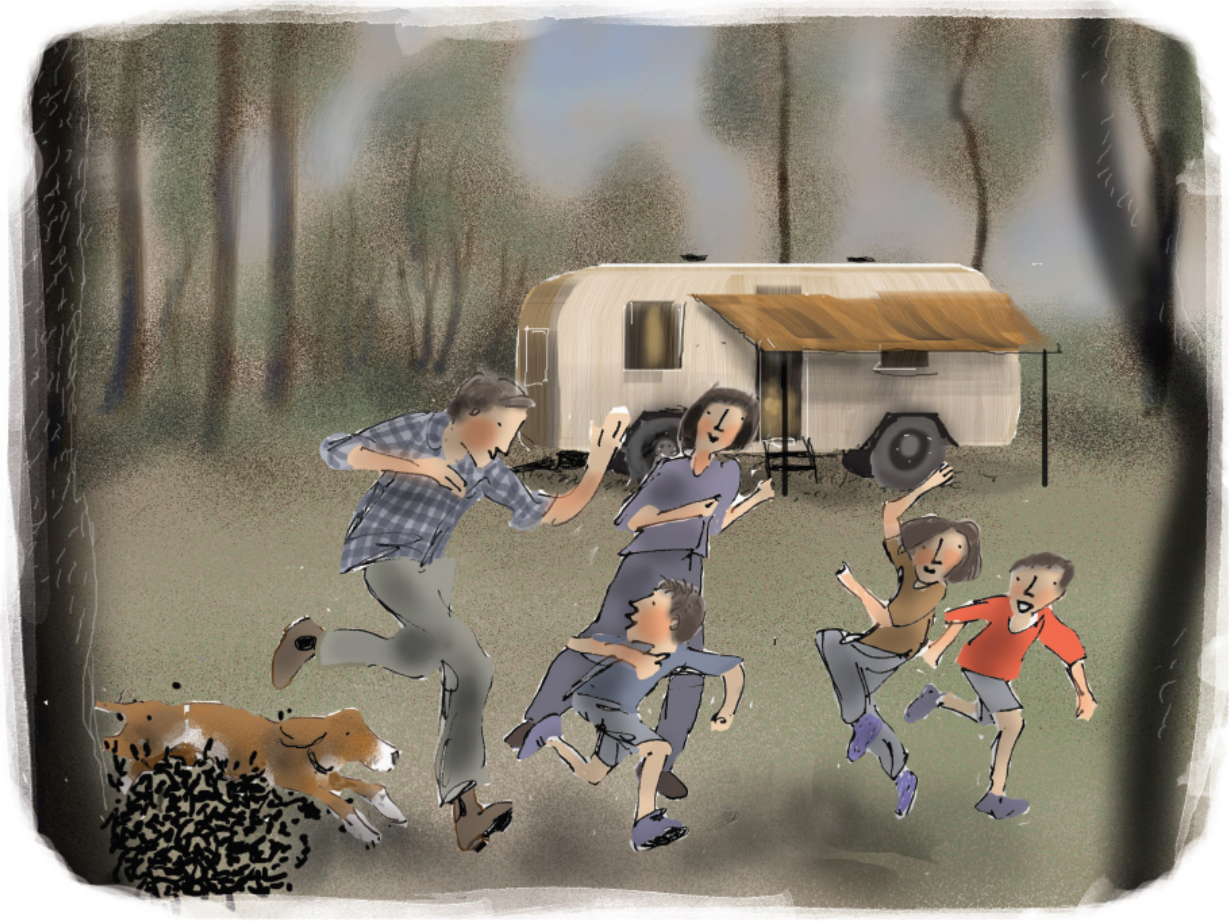


There are photos of them in the hallways, surrounded by flowers and teddy bears. Sometimes I get tired of seeing their faces, and I just want to forget. In class I sit with my pen not quite touching the paper, frozen.

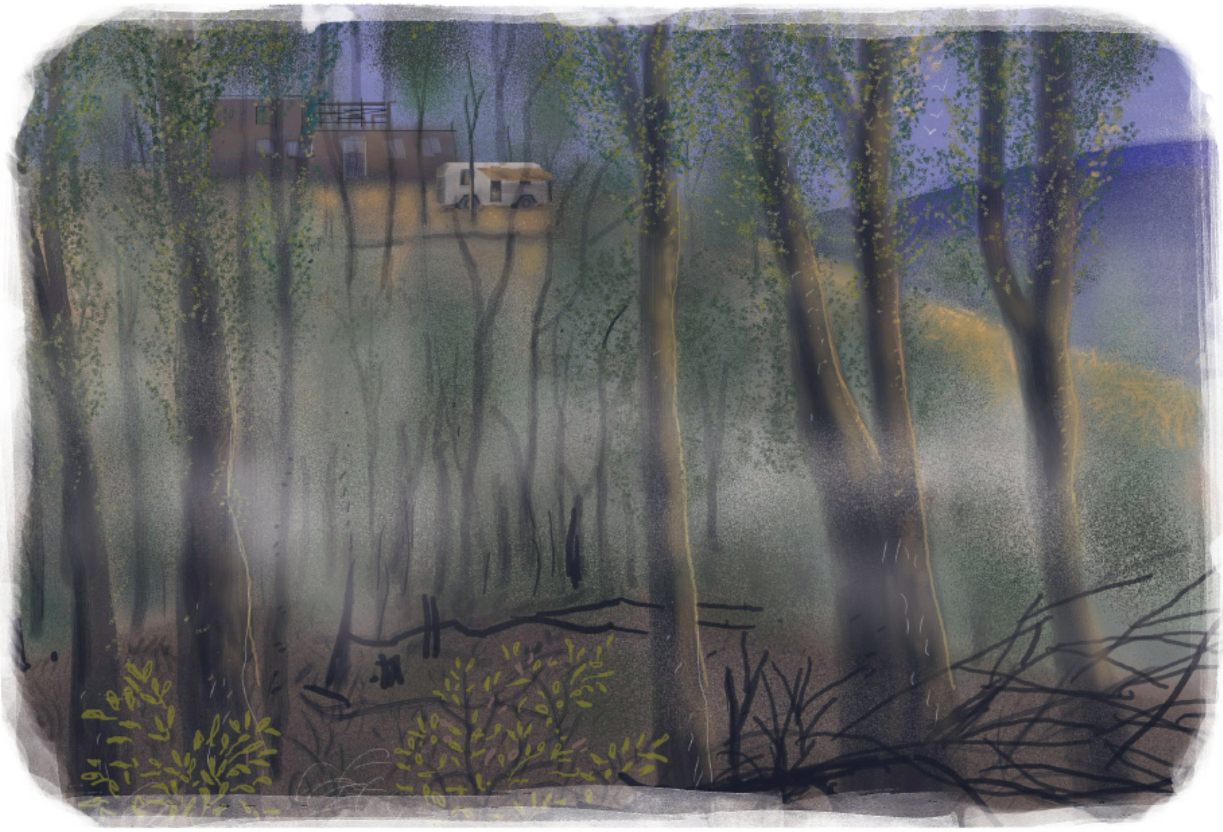
MONTHS PASS, AND one day we move back up to the block. We have two caravans, and life is squashy but everyone seems happier than they have for a long time. Mum and Dad's friends often come for the weekend, staying the night in tents where the front lawn used to be. They shift logs and make mud bricks, and their laughter echoes through the trees. Our job is to collect all of the half-drunk cups of tea, and to offer the sweet biscuits around.

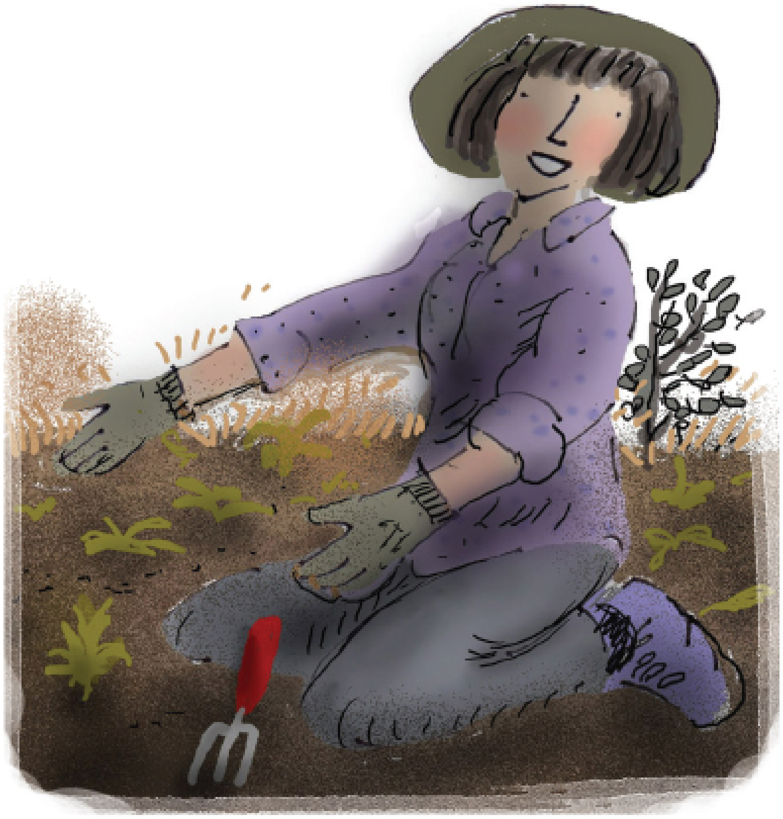


Trucks come carrying huge pieces of timber and steel, and the frame of our new house begins to grow around us. Dad rescues an old paint-splattered radio from the tip. It sounds terrible, but he turns it up loud and chases and tickles us until we dance, and then it doesn't matter anymore. Ruby runs around like a maniac, balancing on the floor joists, leaping over piles of bricks.

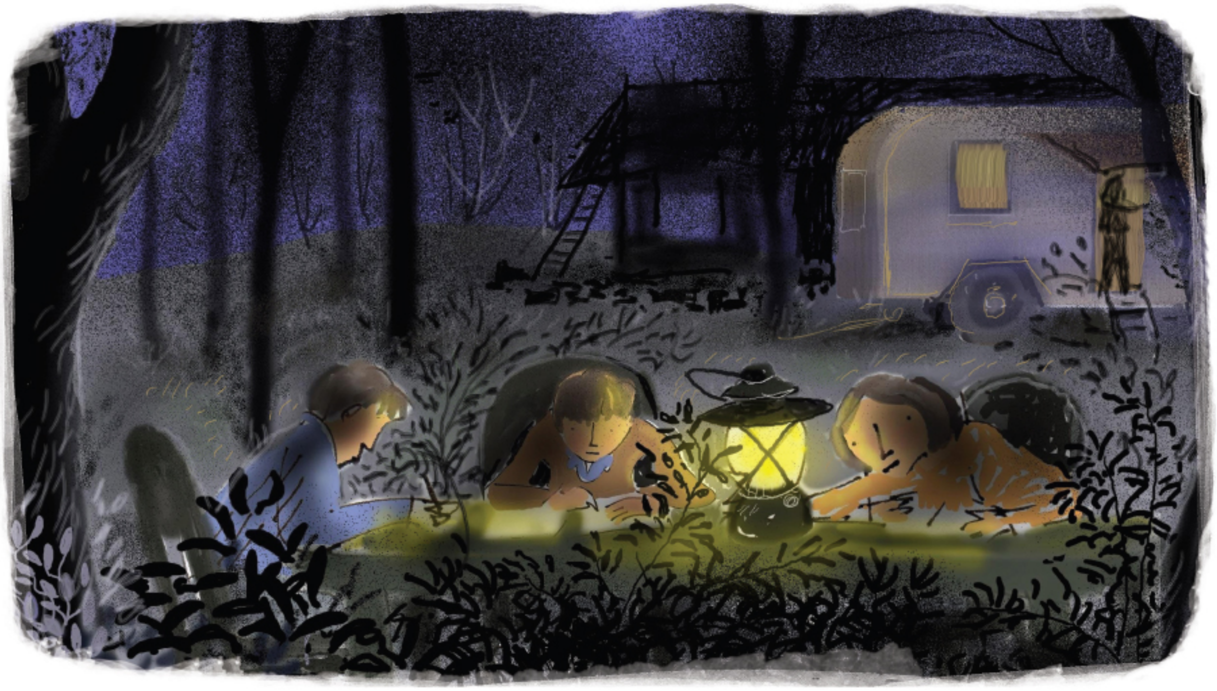


In the mornings the fog rolls up the hill just like it used to. Mum digs over the soil in her old garden beds. Shoots of green are sprouting all the way up the tree trunks, and a few of Mum's plants poke their heads out of the blackened ground. Whenever she discovers one, she calls for us to come and look.

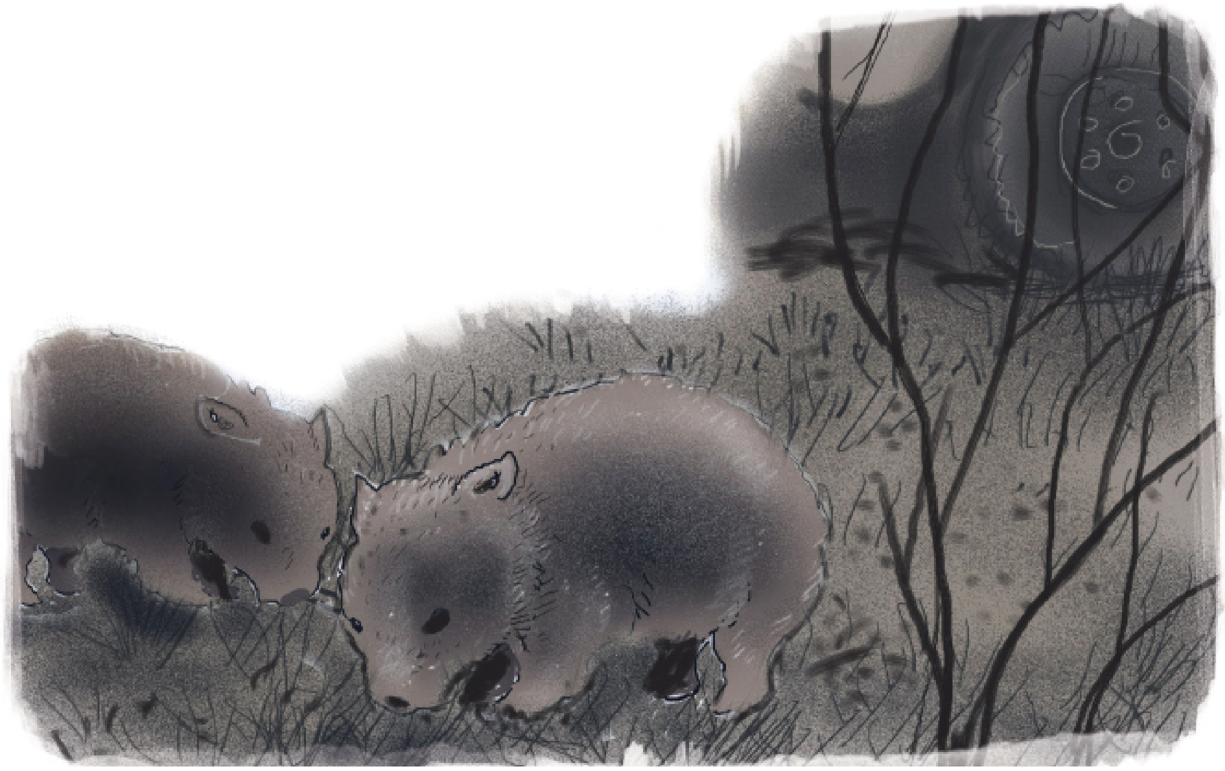




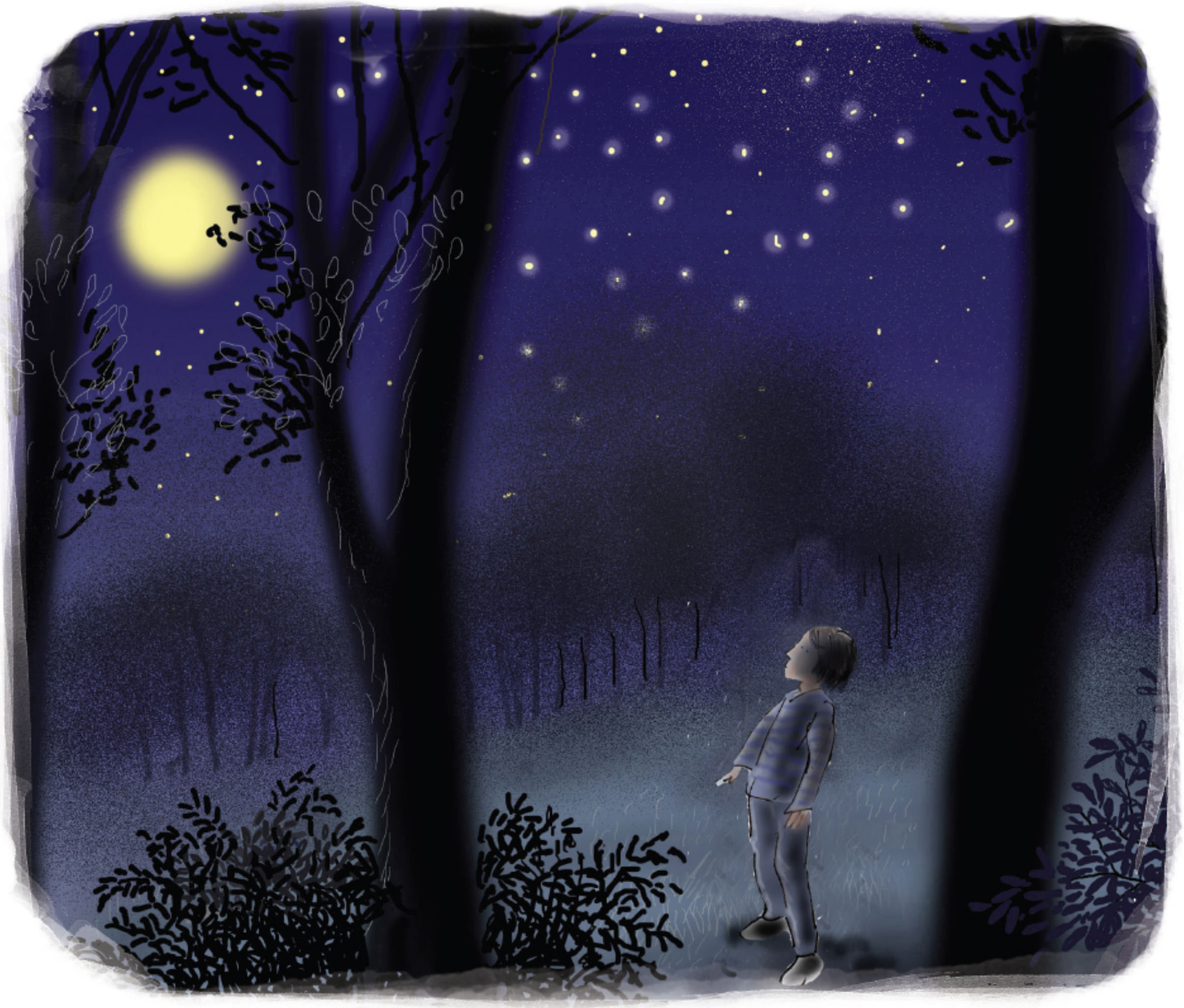
Dad says our new house might even be ready by the end of summer. In the evenings, while he cooks dinner, we do our homework at the plastic camping table outside, surrounded by the smell of dirt and gum leaves.



At night we can hear the wombats, snuffling and scratching next to the caravan, and sometimes an owl, calling out into the blackness.



The sky is endless and impossibly far away, pinpricked with tiny stars. When I stand in the dark where the front lawn used to be and close my eyes, I can still feel our old house, reaching its arms around me. And I breathe in time to its memory.



A note from the author

(to be read with a grown-up)

The little girl in this story began her life as me. The twins were once my brothers, the parents my mum and dad. Ruby was our dog, Brittany.

When I was born, Mum and Dad brought me home to their bush block in Kinglake, Victoria. We lived in a caravan while they built a shed, and then in the shed while they built our house. By the time my twin brothers came along we were living in the house, similar to the one you can see in this book. Much like these kids, we spent a lot of our childhood outside, roaming the bush.

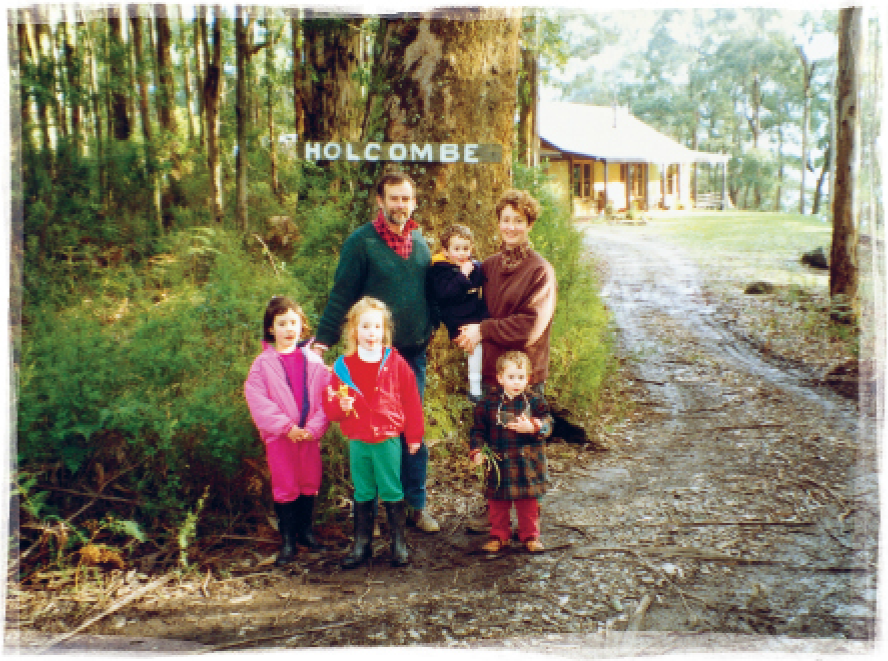
On 7 February 2009, there was an enormous bushfire. One hundred and seventy-three people died, and thousands lost loved ones, homes, pets and possessions. That day became known as Black Saturday. My brothers and I lost our mum and dad, our home, and our beautiful Brittany that day.

I could have written that story, but I knew it too well already. Instead I wanted to capture something else – something about continuity, about movement and regrowth.

My brothers and I still own the block of land on top of the mountain. At first we had a few caravans up there, then a shed, and we’re about to start building a house. We were there from the beginning, when everything was still black, and the wind howled through spaces where the bush once was. We watched tiny shoots of green appear from trees we thought had died. And we were surrounded by friends who came up to help. Now I watch my own son playing among the trees where our house once stood.

I wanted this story to be about more than loss. Because family and home are bigger than that. This is for you, Mum and Dad. Thanks for letting us roam.

Ella Holcombe, 2018



Left to right: Me, my good friend Zoe, Dad, Patrick,
Mum and Eugene, at the end of our driveway in 1989